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November 1989

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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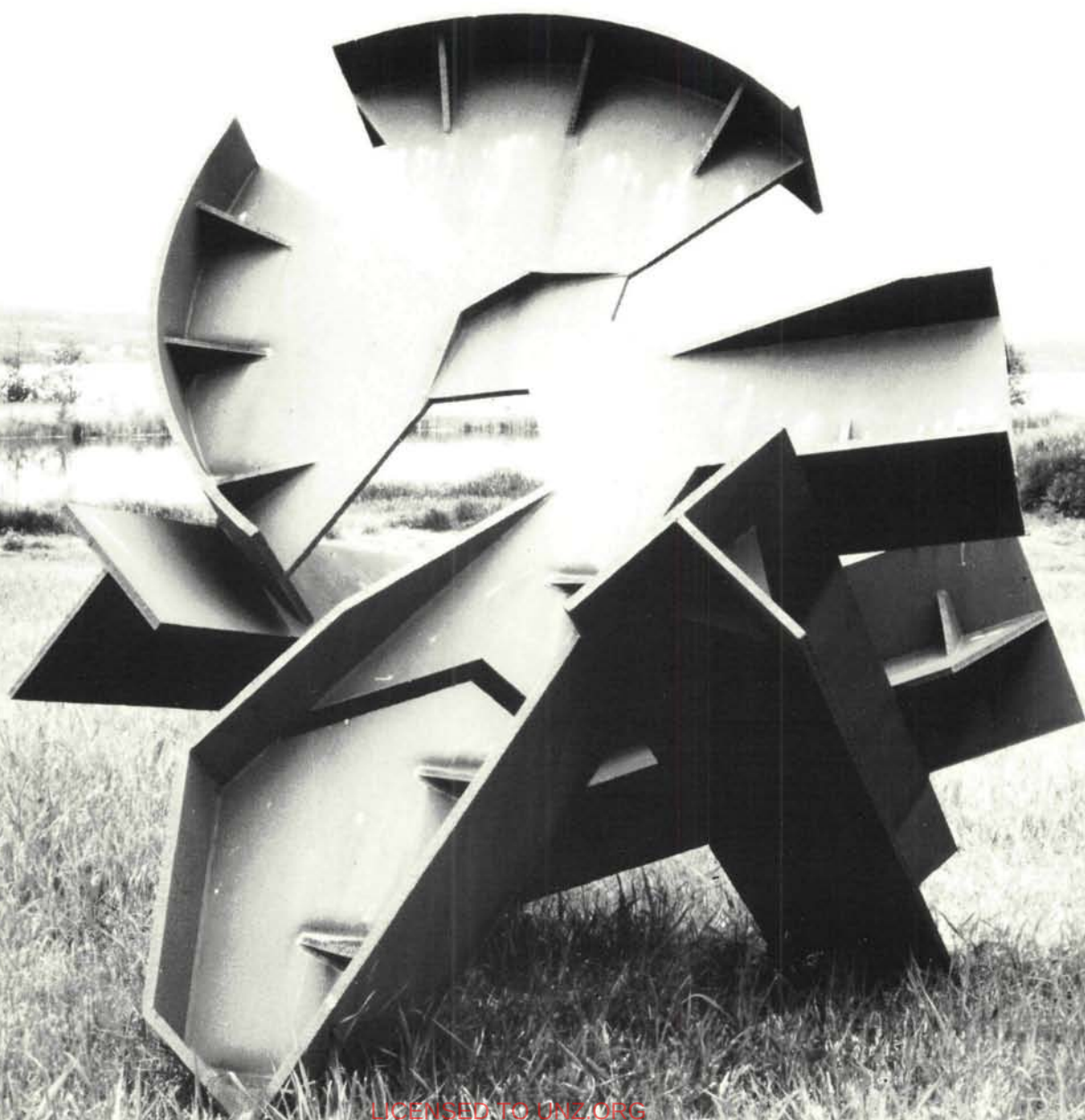
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The New Criterion *November 1989*

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Notes & Comments:

November 1989

Taking the classics off the air

New developments in the electronic broadcast media since the 1950s, despite numerous predictions to the contrary, have proven deleterious to the cause of art and the life of the mind. Television, whether private or public, sinks each year ever deeper into the slough of cultural despond. The hope so loudly trumpeted a decade ago that cable TV (also called “narrowcasting”), in appealing to smaller and more serious publics, would provide a renaissance in the televising of domestically produced concerts, opera, dance, and theater, has ended up doing no more than providing outlets for the already existent, fully paid-for work of state-supported European institutions. By now it is also plain that the revitalization of commercial radio that has taken place over the last two or so decades, however many fortunes it may have created, has had a malign effect on the cultural level of both privately and publicly owned stations.

What has happened, not surprisingly, is that as the actual and potential audience for radio has grown, the economic value of the stations themselves has also grown. Attracted by the prospect of a large listenership, advertisers have made radio broadcasting big business. Why this should be is no secret: There is more to be gained by an advertiser in reaching a larger rather than a smaller audience. It is also no secret that the advertising rates are determined not just by

the size but by the composition of the audience; since the young have more to spend—or at least spend more—it is thus to their popular tastes that radio broadcasting will inevitably appeal.

It had once been thought that the provision of public radio, like that of public television, would allow our properly market-oriented society to have the best of both worlds: a free and large market for what the great majority of people desired to hear, and a subsidized and vastly smaller market for what a cultivated minority wanted, and—just as important—for what might be of long-term educational value. What should have been anticipated, but was not, was that the very market pressures that in a gross manner produced the markets-and-numbers ethos of commercial broadcasting would operate similarly in the non-commercial world as well. It has been clear for many years now that public television was animated by the same lust for ratings as the commercial sector. It is now clear that the same can be said of public radio. As public radio has grown, it has devoutly wished to grow more; nothing counts these days in public radio, it seems, but the number of bodies tuned in at any given moment.

All this is now hitting home with particular force in the case of classical-music broadcasting. For many years now, commercial

and non-commercial stations alike have carried the complete concert seasons of the greatest American orchestras—among them New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Cleveland—along with others—among them Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Washington, Cincinnati, and San Francisco—of slightly less fame but hardly less artistic merit. Along with these concerts, radio stations have carried (in addition, of course, to the perennial Texaco-sponsored Metropolitan Opera broadcasts) the season offerings of such opera companies as the Chicago Lyric Opera, the San Francisco Opera, and the New York City Opera. It has also been possible to hear on a regular basis the entire seasons of the Bayreuth and Salzburg Festivals, along with much else from Europe.

Increasingly, this happy situation no longer obtains. The trend is unmistakably toward a constriction of classical music programming. The New York Philharmonic, the first American orchestra to broadcast (in 1922!), has not been on the radio anywhere since the end of last December; it has seemed impossible for the Philharmonic to secure the necessary funds from its private, foundation, and corporate backers. Here in New York the two commercial classical stations, WNCN and WQXR (the latter owned by *The New York Times* and for many years the flagship station of the Philharmonic network) are clearly under massive pressure to increase the number of their listeners, and it is equally clear that they have decided to do so by lightening the kind of music they program—less unfamiliar music, less twentieth-century music, and less vocal music—and by lowering the tone of the surrounding commentary. In another significant development, KFAC, the last remaining commercial classical station in the huge southern California market, recently shifted to a rock format, leaving serious music broadcasting to the public station located at the University of Southern California.

Unfortunately, despite many still excellent stations, the new demand in public radio across the country, as we learned from an

August article in *The New York Times*, is for one-hour rather than two-hour programs—in other words, for mini-concerts snappily presented with lots of exciting talk, rather than for actual concerts with lots of music, presented just as they occur in real life. Under this new dispensation, conductors—or music directors as they are called these days—will lose still more control over how what they do is heard by the public.

All the usual arguments that accompany the cheapening of artistic life are advanced (with particular force, it must be added, by those responsible for the New York City-owned WNYC-FM): new audiences require new formats; people don't have the time or the inclination to sit down and listen to an extended concert; radio is a creative medium that has special requirements and presents special opportunities. And lurking everywhere is the insinuation that classical music belongs to a stuffy and dark age, rather than to the "now generation" and its "new age" tastes.

Here, in the substitution of programming imperatives for artistic decisions, is nothing less than the replacement of art by public relations, of the artist by the meddling and untrained administrator, and, finally, of a weighty past by a present favored for its triviality. If this is the best public radio can do to provide culture to a nation, do we need public radio?

Academic acceleration

It has often been observed that a good many of the campus radicals who caused such havoc and breakdown in our colleges and universities twenty years ago are now installed as tenured faculty and academic administrators at institutions great and small. Now "working within the system" (as the saying went), they have abandoned their bullhorns and picket lines for more respectable instruments of persuasion, and

have thereby succeeded in institutionalizing their radical agenda on a scale that must in many instances exceed even the most ardent fantasies of their youthful activism. The results are well known: intellectual waste, wreckage, and coercion that, especially in the humanistic disciplines, have reduced many academic programs to a political parody of what they once were.

This process of destruction is no longer news, and may indeed have reached the point of being irreversible. What is news, however, is the sheer speed with which the initiatives in this bulldozer campaign are now implemented. What once took a generation to accomplish is now possible to see realized in months or weeks. A recent episode on the Columbia University campus offered us a classic example of the way "the system" currently works in these matters.

Last May, during the Columbia commencement ceremonies, a student named Laura Hotchkiss Brown tried to unfurl from the roof of Butler Library a 140-foot-long banner bearing the names of Sappho, Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Brontë, Dickinson, and Woolf. The point was, of course, to offer the names of these female writers as additions or alternatives to those of Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Cicero, and Vergil that have long been inscribed on the façade of Butler Library.

The university's immediate response to this act of feminist ideological warfare was to order the banner removed by security officers, and to arrest the student responsible for it. But she was quickly released, and Laura Hotchkiss Brown was straightaway elevated to the status of an academic leader. As soon as the fall term opened, an exhibition and lecture series based on her banner—the so-called "Butler Library Banner Project," co-sponsored by the Columbia University Libraries and the Columbia Institute for Research on Women and Gender—was organized, with various

members of the Columbia faculty enlisted to speak about the glories of Brown's roster of female literary eminences. Naturally these events, complete with an inaugural wine-and-cheese reception, take place at—where else?—Butler Library. This is the speed with which yesterday's radical initiative becomes today's official agenda.

The names that adorned Brown's celebrated banner are interesting, of course, as an example of what happens when the study of literature becomes radically ideologized. For what is striking about the majority of these names is that they are minor, if not indeed marginal, figures. And it is not as if there were no major female writers available to serve in their place. Neither on the Butler Library banner nor in the lectures based on it are the names of such major writers as Jane Austen, George Eliot, or George Sand to be found. We must assume, therefore, that it does not serve the political interests of the "Project," as it is called, for students to be reminded that where women have produced major work, their achievements have usually been amply recognized. But alas, so, where warranted, have been their limitations. As Renee Winegarten writes elsewhere in this issue of *The New Criterion* about the case of George Sand, "the immense variety of her literary projects (which influenced writers as diverse as Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Henry James) cannot blind her deepest admirers . . . to the fact that she never produced a single work of art to rank with *Madame Bovary*, which was in some respects a response to her outlook. She herself modestly admitted as much to Flaubert. Such a view has nothing to do with patriarchy and everything to do with art."

But of course such initiatives as the "Butler Library Banner Project" have nothing to do with art. What they have to do with is the conquest of political power. We know for what purposes such power will be exercised: the destruction of the hard-won incremental legacy of our civilization.

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Reflections on “Bad Art”

by *Hilton Kramer*

It is audacious for a writer on art on the eve of his eightieth birthday to publish a volume of criticism called *Bad Art*.¹ The subject, after all, is such a large and various one. It extends in so many directions and encompasses such a massive quantity of objects and so vast a range of “ideas” that even to think of charting a course through the terrain to be covered is a daunting prospect. This is especially the case at the present moment, when contributions to the already huge stock of bad art accumulate at a greater rate of speed than ever before in our history. In this lugubrious endeavor, the nineteenth century—when large-scale production of the stuff seems to have begun in earnest—could not be said to be laggard; but the twentieth century has long outdistanced its predecessor in the sheer scale and variety of the bad art it has seen produced (and praised), and the later decades of this century have proved to be even more copious than the earlier ones. To write even a short history of bad art would require, in addition to a prodigious sense of humor, both a superhuman gift for scholarly detachment and something akin to a mortician’s capacity to live with equanimity in the company of corpses. It is no wonder, therefore, that no such book has yet been vouchsafed to us. The time has probably passed, in any case, when it could be written, for nowadays the very concept of

bad art is, if not exactly discredited, certainly shied away from. Art historians abjure it, art critics are discomfited by it, and a good many art collectors and museum curators—for perfectly understandable reasons—bristle at the very mention of it. The entire ethos of the contemporary art world is now so hostile to the kind of discrimination and conviction on which the concept of bad art rests that the term itself is in the process of being retired, if not indeed buried.

Before the last obsequies have been pronounced on this once honored (and, in my own view, still indispensable) idea, it may be worth pondering what its consignment to oblivion is likely to mean to the life of art. In this respect, Quentin Bell’s new book is not so much a guide to the perplexed as it is a comforting poultice designed to relieve whatever nagging anxieties may still be felt among those who, although resigned to bidding the idea of bad art farewell, are nonetheless at a loss to account for their actual experience of art without it. *Bad Art* is very far from being a history of the subject invoked in its title, and still less is it a critical elucidation of the concept. Mr. Bell adopts toward it an attitude that is at once quizzical, wary, and amused—an attitude that never quite brings itself to denounce the idea of bad art in any categorical way, but prefers instead to demote it to the realm of understandable human follies that no longer command our credence. Acutely conscious of the errors in judgment that have been

¹ *Bad Art*, by Quentin Bell; University of Chicago Press, 245 pages, \$29.95.

made in the past, he remains hesitant about offering any confident judgments of his own. It is not that he does not recognize a good painting when he sees one. He most certainly does, as more than one of the essays in *Bad Art* attest. But he cannot bring himself to call such a painting "good." The history of past errors appears to have robbed him of the right to do so. So he speaks instead of "what we call good art," thus making provisional and contingent what his own aesthetic experience has nonetheless convinced him is good. Since his knowledge of history (as he reads it) has denied Mr. Bell the right to call anything "bad," it has also, apparently, deprived him of the ability to pronounce anything "good." This, to say the least, is quite a conundrum for an art critic to find himself in, but Mr. Bell is by no means alone in his predicament. On the contrary, his is a representative case—and what it represents is the demoralization that has overtaken the whole process of aesthetic judgment in our time, a demoralization that is now all but indistinguishable from abdication.

About the history that has brought us to this pass Mr. Bell is keenly conscious. As he writes in his preface to *Bad Art*:

About the middle of the last century a new phenomenon was created: the taste of the establishment (the academies, salons, art-loving and art-buying public being virtually one and the same). But it, in turn, was challenged by what we now call the *avant-garde*, expressing a view of art which, although it varied, was invariably hostile to the establishment. The establishment, on the other hand, considered the artists of the *avant-garde* were either negligible or despicable. In the eyes of the vast majority, theirs was bad art.

Within half a century this judgment has been reversed. In popular esteem and in the market place, it is now the art of the establishment which seems bad, while the art of the opposition has become good. It is this drastic and astonishing revaluation which provides my point of departure.

In this account of his "point of departure" in *Bad Art*, however, Mr. Bell seems a bit behind the times, for recent decades have brought us yet another reversal in which the art of the nineteenth-century "establishment," as he calls it, has been rehabilitated and restored to artistic respectability in the museums, in the textbook histories, and, not least, in the art market. It is very odd, moreover, that Mr. Bell does not mention this in his preface, for he himself has played a role in this revival of nineteenth-century academic art. It was, in fact, in his curious book on *Victorian Artists* (Harvard University Press, 1967) that he first offered an apologia for the study and restoration of bad art (as he then called it). It was in that book, too, that he drew a sharp distinction between what he called the "evidential value" of bad art and what we should call the aesthetic value of good art. This is the key passage:

The greatest painters were, in fact, singularly unrepresentative of their age. They were either unknown or thought to be frivolous eccentrics. In looking at them alone we are looking at exceptional and uncharacteristic figures who may furnish an agreeable anthology; but such an anthology is not history.

History is, or should be, something wider than a treatise on gifted non-conformists. In fact bad art is of greater evidential value than is good art. Bad art "dates"; it belongs, unmistakably, to its period. Good art is, as they say, "not for an age but for all time" which, of course, makes it decidedly unhistorical.

You or I might think it a bit strange to regard Cézanne or Pissarro as somehow existing outside the art history of their time, but by Mr. Bell's standards the only true history is the history of established power. He returns to this line of reasoning in an essay called "The Art Critic and the Art Historian" in *Bad Art*.

We are drawn to the study of art [he writes] by reason of an aesthetic emotion, an emotion which makes it very difficult to admit that what we call bad art may be just as important,

historically, as that which we call good art. I use the phrase "what we call good art" because . . . things which have been accounted bad become good and vice versa. But although we are aware of this and although we know that changes in style result necessarily from a change in our ideas of what is valuable in art, still it is hard to view art history—or at least recent art history—except through the distorting glass of aesthetic enthusiasm.

Clearly, for Mr. Bell "aesthetic enthusiasm," which is never really distinguished from the "aesthetic emotion" that draws us to art in the first place, is something to be avoided. "Aesthetic enthusiasm," he writes, "is a lovable and a forgivable characteristic but surely the struggle between rival conceptions of art, like the conflicts of nations or of political parties, is one in which the historian should endeavor to understand even if he cannot sympathize with both sides." It is here, alas, that one begins to see that, for Mr. Bell, to "understand" is to forgive, and to forgive—well, isn't it to elevate bad art to a kind of parity with the good? By eliminating "aesthetic enthusiasm," there is finally no significant difference between the bad and the good, and the words themselves become meaningless. Indeed, Mr. Bell descends in this discussion to the language of the Bloomsbury nursery in describing what he most dislikes—what he is most concerned to discredit—in the kind of art history that insists upon making *aesthetic* distinctions. He mocks history of this sort as a struggle—clearly he regards it as a silly struggle—between what he calls "the baddies and the goodies."

It is at this point in *Bad Art*, when it descends to this puerile talk about "baddies" and "goodies," that one is irresistibly reminded of the offstage drama—the scenario of oedipal rebellion—that is being enacted on virtually every page of this very strange book. Mr. Bell is, of course, the son of Clive Bell, who was famous in his day as the critical champion of the modernist painters whom Quentin Bell now mocks as

"the goodies." It was Clive Bell, together with his friend Roger Fry, who most categorically defended the need of criticism to make the kind of aesthetic distinctions that Quentin Bell now deplors. *Bad Art*, like *Victorian Artists*, reads in places—the most important places—like an outright assault on Clive Bell's *Landmarks in Nineteenth Century Painting* (1927) in particular, and on Bell *père's* writings and ideas generally. There are, to be sure, some affectionate references to Clive Bell in the memoir sections of *Bad Art*, but no outright reference to the elder Bell's ideas. Yet in the end *Bad Art* turns out to be a book about "the baddies and the goodies" with the son now defending "the baddies" against his father's critical strictures.

If this scenario of oedipal rebellion were merely a matter of biographical interest, however, it would hardly be worth mentioning—except, that is, as a footnote to the literature of Bloomsbury. What does make it worth our attention, I think, is the larger cultural phenomenon it so clearly represents. For in Mr. Bell's critical assault on the authority of his father's ideas we are given a paradigm of that more general assault on the kind of critical authority that is based on aesthetic distinctions which has swamped the art world in recent years. We saw something remarkably similar manifest itself in the reception that in some quarters was accorded to the publication of the first two volumes of Clement Greenberg's *Collected Essays and Criticism* a couple of years ago. For some of the younger critics who wrote about these volumes, it wasn't only or mainly the specific judgments to be found in Mr. Greenberg's criticism that they found appalling; it was the act of critical judgment itself, and the fact that it so clearly derived from a process of aesthetic discrimination which was assumed to be central to the experience of art. What most enraged these younger critics, in short, was the very idea of authority in artistic matters based on aesthetic judgment. What one saw enacted in their response to Mr. Greenberg was the intellectual scenario so often re-enacted in

their own critical writings: a refusal of authority in themselves that inevitably entailed a rejection of authority in others. In Quentin Bell's *Bad Art*, this refusal of critical authority has been given an historical certification that is much enhanced, of course, by the biographical drama of oedipal revenge from which it derives, and I should therefore not be surprised if the book became a kind of sacred text for the generation of critics that now wants to enjoy all the rights of criticism without having to take responsibility for critical judgment.

It is interesting, in this regard, to take note of the role that fashion—the history of “fashions in dress,” to use Mr. Bell's own words—plays in shaping his thinking about all artistic matters. “Art history is a record of change,” he writes in his essay on “Bad Art,” and then promptly adds: “Pictures, like fashions in dress, are first liked and then disliked. If we examine the history of taste during the past two hundred years, this pattern is repeated . . . that which was loved and admired becomes hateful and ridiculous.” From this

it follows—for Mr. Bell, anyway—that, as he writes in the same essay, “the history of art may be regarded as the history of a consumer-producer relationship.” The history of “fashions in dress” thus becomes the model for all of art history, and indeed it has been the model for Mr. Bell since the book he gave us many years ago called *On Human Finery*.

Now, it would be obtuse to deny that the history of fashion offers some rich insights into the human mind, but to take it as a model for art history is to reduce art itself to the history of fashion. Which is to say, it denies to art any of the claims to permanence that distinguish what is genuine in art from what is specious. It is only by subsuming art into the dynamics of fashion, in other words, that bad art can be spoken of with such affection and the words “not for an age but for all time” can be used so derisively.

But it is, of course, in the name of fashion—cultural fashion—that so much of the bad art of our time has been so extravagantly praised by writers who, like Quentin Bell, still consider themselves critics.

The mere common sense of Sydney Smith

by Joseph Epstein

Odd that it should be called “common sense,” when the quality that those words have been appointed to describe is itself not only uncommon but extremely rare. Everyone will have his own notions of what constitutes common sense, and mine include an ability to tote up accurately the debits and credits that any complex decision presents; sufficient detachment to be able to remove one’s own emotions and personal interests in order to gain maximum lucidity in understanding; a gift for grasping and articulating the obvious point that eludes everyone else; and, above all, a superiority of perspective that permits one to realize how issues and questions that agitate minds and stir hearts today will appear five and ten and fifty years from now. “Mere common sense,” we say, but so unusual is it that we might as well say “mere transcendent beauty” or “mere wisdom.”

Common sense has not been notable among German philosophers, French literary critics, professors of all nationalities, psychotherapists, and most people who earn their livings with their minds. Not that it is the preserve of the working classes or common people. It pops up with a randomness Darwinism cannot account for or common sense itself quite comprehend. A French diplomatist might have it, or a Texas politician, or a Jewish grandmother. How charming that it should have shown up, in heightened form, in a portly English clergyman born in 1771 who bore the name

of Smith—though Macaulay, when told that a man named Smith was awaiting him, realizing that the man was Sydney Smith, referred to him as “the Smith of Smiths.”

Where he is known at all, Sydney Smith is today best known for his aphorisms and comic *mots*. “Those two women will never agree,” he once said of two women screaming insults at each other from their apartments across a narrow street in Edinburgh. “They are arguing from different premises.” He is also known as one of the founders of the *Edinburgh Review*, the great Whig journal to which he contributed chiefly polemical articles during its first three decades. Queen Victoria laughed heartily at his sayings, as reported to her by Lord Melbourne; Dickens claimed that the praise of Sydney Smith meant more to him than that of anyone else; and Abraham Lincoln read him regularly and quoted him often. If one has to have a small, select audience of admirers, here are three names well worth including in it.

One gets, I believe, a nice sense of the general tone of Sydney Smith in a letter of 1807 that he wrote to Francis Jeffrey, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, in which he avers: “I have three motives for writing reviews: 1st the love of you; 2nd the habit of reviewing; 3rd the love of money—to which I would add a fourth, the love of punishing fraud or folly.” I was much impressed by this letter when I first came across it twenty-odd years ago quoted in

John Clive's *Scotch Reviewers: The "Edinburgh Review" 1802-1815*, and now after thirty years in the business—"and still wearing a card-board belt," as Zero Mostel says in *The Producers*—I remain impressed with it for both its precision and its comprehensiveness as an account of why one writes for intellectual journals. No one but Sydney Smith, I think, would have included motive number two, sheer habit, in such a list, but then part of his skill was to say the obvious thing that is only obvious after he has said it.

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money," wrote Dr. Johnson, rather blockheadedly, in my view, for Hobbes scarcely wrote his *Leviathan* for cash or Tom Paine *The Rights of Man* with, specifically, subsidiary rights in mind. But Sydney Smith was a man in need of money in all but the last years of his life, and no doubt without the need for money he would have written less. His moderate penury was owing to his father, a rash man who bought and sold several houses—roughly nineteen of them, by his granddaughter's count—altering and spoiling each and then selling it for a loss. Sydney's father, according to Alan Bell in his 1980 biography,¹ "was an ill-tempered man, who treated all his children badly, and Sydney, his most famous son, worst of all." Sydney was the second born of four sons (there was also a last-born child, a daughter). Two of the sons went to Eton; Sydney and one of his younger brothers went to Winchester. He hated public school—where, as he later wrote in an *Edinburgh Review* essay, "every boy is alternatively tyrant and slave"—but this hatred did not deflect him from winning a fellowship at Oxford. Sydney's older brother read for the bar, and later, through connections, became Advocate General at Calcutta, where he arranged for jobs for the two younger brothers. Sydney would have preferred to study law, but his father, concerned about the expense, discouraged him and urged on him instead a career in the

Church. Without great enthusiasm, Sydney acquiesced. It was a decision that kept him worried about money for most of his life.

The constant concern about money, the sadness of carrying around the secure knowledge that one's father was distinctly not on one's side, such things have permanently thrown lesser men. Sydney Smith, however, was not to be thrown. He determined not to be and, therefore, wasn't. Locked into a clerical living in the fastness of Yorkshire, one that paid poorly and was well beneath his talent and kept him from the London society in which he shone so lustreously, he nonetheless wrote to his friend Lady Holland, who he had heard laughed at reports of his contentment in the country:

In the first place whether one lives or dies I hold and always have held to be of infinitely less moment than is generally supposed; but if life is the choice then it is common sense to amuse yourself with the best you can find where you happen to be placed. I am not leading precisely the life I should chuse, but that which (all things considered, as well as I could consider them) appeared to be the most eligible. I am resolved therefore to like it and to reconcile myself to it; which is more manly than to feign myself above it, and to send up complaints by the post, of being thrown away, and being desolate and such like trash. I am prepared therefore either way. If the chances of life ever enable me to emerge, I will shew you that I have not been wholly occupied by small and sordid pursuits. If (as the greater probability is) I am come to the end of my career, I give myself quietly up to horticulture, and the annual augmentation of my family. In short, if my lot be to crawl, I will crawl contentedly; if to fly, I will fly with alacrity; but as long as I can possibly avoid it I will never be unhappy.

Sydney Smith was thirty-eight when he wrote that, a fine time to feel melancholy about the absence of progress in one's life. But he had his wife, their children, his books, his intellectual curiosity, his ever refreshed amazement at the world's apparently endless

1 Alan Bell's *Sydney Smith: A Biography* was published by the Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press.

peculiarity—and it was sufficient until something better turned up. “Genius,” said Ortega, “is the ability to invent one’s own occupation,” but at the level of common sense I wonder if it doesn’t require something very akin to genius to find happiness at an occupation not of one’s choosing.

If with no strong sense of either special aptitude or spiritual vocation Sydney Smith became a clergyman, his doing so was not entirely anomalous, for it is well to recall that late in the eighteenth and in the first half of the nineteenth century an intelligent young man of literary leanings could still find the clergy a fit profession. In the Church of England, Swift became a dean, and Laurence Sterne a canon. Like the Church of Rome before it, the Church of England, as Richard Monckton Milnes noted, “participated in all the intellectual as well as spiritual movements of mankind It thought it no derogation to be a valuable branch of the civil service, to guard the morality and guide the education of the people.” Nor were its members above political bias, and most clergymen tended toward Toryism at least insofar as they were preponderantly opposed to change. Part of the distinction of Sydney Smith is that he was lined up on the other side, a Whig with strong Whiggish connections, a member of an established church who nevertheless considered few social arrangements permanently locked in.

Sydney Smith is distinctive, too, in having a reputation far from, nor even chiefly, founded on his purely literary work. Something of the same might be said of Samuel Johnson, whose standing for certain readers owes much to the impressive persona created for him through the pages of Boswell’s biography. But Johnson was, after all, a poet, critic, essayist, journalist, lexicographer—in short, a powerful writer who gave his name to an age. Sydney Smith was mainly a polemical essayist and occasional satirist, the vast quantity of whose work appeared in one journal, the *Edinburgh Review*. He was also a charming letter writer, and the two-volume edition of his letters

edited by Nowell C. Smith,² filled with delightful wit, wisdom, and plainspoken good sense, comprises one of the great collections of nineteenth-century letters. Yet letters are literature only by the way, or after the fact. In his own day, Sydney Smith was most famous as a talker, a fount of bonhomie and uproarious laughter. Testimony to how good the flow of his talk must have been is provided by the large fund of his jokes, puns, aphorisms, and drolleries that has been preserved, often in other people’s diaries and memoirs, where accounts of his social performances pop up with some regularity. “I sat next to Sydney Smith,” noted a young Benjamin Disraeli, “who was delightful I don’t remember a more agreeable party.” Similar quotations are not difficult to find.

As writer, talker, correspondent, clergyman, husband, and father, Sydney Smith’s life, in all its aspects and facets, was so much of a piece as to appear a seamless performance. There was something at once formidable and informal about Sydney Smith; reverend though he was, no one less required reverential treatment. A devastating polemicist and hence not a man one would want for an enemy, he was nonetheless referred to almost universally as “Sydney”—as one thinks of another writer in the same line, Max Beerbohm, as “Max”—and he referred to his own wife, in correspondence with others, as “Mrs. Sydney.” In a “Narrative for My Grandchildren,” written after his death, she noted: “I do not believe that anyone filling only a subordinate rank in life ever past thro’ it more universally beloved, more sought after for his brilliancy and wit, his honorable bearing, his masterly talents, his truth, his honesty.”

Although Mrs. Sydney never had any doubts about her husband’s winning through—in the “Narrative for My Grand-

2 *The Letters of Sydney Smith* was published by the Clarendon Press in 1953. Nowell Smith’s own one-volume abridgment, *Selected Letters*, is available in paper, with an introduction by Auberon Waugh, in Oxford’s World’s Classics series.

children” she cited his “bold and fearless love of truth” and “ardent love of human happiness that no feelings of selfish prudence could ever control”—Sydney Smith’s eventual triumph owed much to his connection with the *Edinburgh Review*, the journal of which he is now commonly reckoned to have been the chief progenitor. He found himself in Edinburgh to begin with only because he and the son of a well-to-do squire, to whom he had signed on as a tutor, felt it unsafe to travel to Weimar with war then raging in Europe and so settled instead in Edinburgh in 1798. Of his years in Edinburgh, which ran from 1798 to 1803, he later wrote: “Never shall I forget the happy days passed there, amidst odious smells, barbarous sounds, bad suppers, excellent hearts, and most enlightened and cultivated understandings.” Along with its libraries, interesting architecture, terrible sewerage system, and “large healthy virgins with mild pleasing countenances and white swelling breasts” (in the young Reverend Smith’s careful description), Edinburgh was the site of several small dining clubs and debating societies made up of young lawyers and litterateurs as well as scientists and scholars from the University of Edinburgh. With his wide intellectual interests and conversational suavity, Sydney Smith smoothly inserted himself among the habitués of these groups, and to five or six of the most impressive intellectual figures in Edinburgh he proposed that they join to put out a journal to review both domestic and foreign books of serious intent.

In the language of the Chamber of Commerce, the *Edinburgh Review* not only put the city of Edinburgh intellectually “on the map” but did something similar for serious journalism. George Saintsbury, in his essay on Francis Jeffrey, remarks that “the reviews of the time had got into the hands either of gentlemen and ladies who were happy to be thought literary, and only too glad to write for nothing, or else into those of the lowest booksellers’ hacks, who praised or blamed according to orders, wrote without interest and without vigour, and

were quite content to earn the smallest pittance.” The *Edinburgh Review* paid its contributors, and paid them well enough to hold them up to standards of quality. In a letter outlining the original plan for the journal, Sydney Smith wrote that “the rocks and shoals to be avoided are religion, politics, excessive severity, and irritable Scotchmen.” Except perhaps for the irritable Scotchmen, it was precisely among these rocks and shoals that the *Edinburgh Review* sailed most successfully. As Saintsbury notes, “the *Edinburgh*, whatever it pretended to be, was violently partisan, unhesitatingly personal, and more inclined to find fault, the more distinguished the subject was.”

Before it was done, the *Edinburgh Review* could claim many a political prize for its trophy case. In ways that cannot be precisely calculated but that are nonetheless generally acknowledged, the journal, through arguments conducted in its pages, contributed importantly to the emancipation of Catholics, the representation by counsel for anyone accused of a capital crime, the abolition of the death penalty for stealing, the establishment of parliamentary representation in Scotland, the closing off of the slave trade, and much more. As Sydney Smith wrote to Jeffrey in 1826, twenty-four years after the founding of the *Edinburgh Review*, “it must be to you, as I am sure it is to me, a real pleasure to see so many improvements taking place, and so many abuses destroyed;—abuses upon which you, with cannon and mortars, and I with sparrow shot, have been playing for so many years.”

After Sydney Smith left Edinburgh, Francis Jeffrey, a lawyer by training, became the *Edinburgh Review*’s full-time editor at a full-time salary (commercially, the journal was an immediate success). From London or from his subsequent parsonages in Yorkshire or Somersetshire, Sydney wrote to Jeffrey to request new books to review and offered him straightforward criticisms of each issue. About writing of any kind, he said, “I never deceive.” Scrupulous financial accounts were kept; with four children on a

not very ample church living, Sydney had good use for the money he earned reviewing. All contributions to the *Edinburgh Review* were unsigned, though Sydney's must have been unmistakable for their playful wit—not that he couldn't, playfully, knock an author's head off or, wittily, eviscerate a work of extravagant pretensions.

But no editor-writer relationship, no matter how much affection is felt on both sides, is without its prickliness. Before long Sydney is complaining to Jeffrey about editing: "I think," he writes in 1807, "you have spoilt many of my jokes; but this, I suppose, every writer thinks, whose works you alter; and I am unfortunately, as you know, the vainest and most irritable of human beings." As Sydney becomes more famous, he becomes touchier about editorial tinkering: "while I write," he reports to Jeffrey, "I must write in my own way." He agrees to revise an article, but cannot resist adding: "If you mean that my article itself is light and scanty I agree to that, reminding you that lightness and flimsiness are *my line of reviewing*." Meanwhile, he does not hesitate to tell Jeffrey that too many pieces in the *Edinburgh Review* are too long, or that Jeffrey should knock off his own criticisms of Wordsworth. (Poor Francis Jeffrey, a splendid editor and for the most part a fine critic, has gone down in literary history as the man who could not have been wronger about Wordsworth.) "Do not be hurt by my critiques on your criticisms," he writes to Jeffrey, "you know (if you know anything) the love and respect I have for you; this is not enough—add also, the very *high admiration*."

Sydney Smith was one of those altogether agreeable men who absolutely know their own worth and was, consistent with his desire to remain agreeable, not to be pushed around, taken advantage of, or otherwise trifled with. He was a habitué of Holland House, the most brilliant of Whig salons, where, according to David Cecil, biographer of Lord Melbourne, Smith was "the most humane of clergymen, crackling away like a

genial bonfire of jokes and good sense and uproarious laughter." I am sure it was so, but it won't do to overplay Sydney Smith as the jolly jokey clergyman. Lady Holland, hostess of Holland House and a woman to whom he wrote some of his tenderest and most solicitous letters, once, at table at Holland House, asked him to ring the bell for a servant, to which he replied: "Certainly. And shall I sweep the floor as well?"

"A passionate man," said Stendhal, "is never witty." But Sydney Smith was a witty man who could also be passionate. The passion appears in his writings where it combines with wit, often to devastating effect. Sydney Smith has been called, after Swift, England's most powerful satirist. His best early work in this line is to be discovered in *The Peter Plymley Letters*, which he began publishing pseudonymously in the autumn of 1807, on behalf of Catholic Emancipation. Roman Catholics in England at that time could not (until 1829, when full rights were granted them) vote for candidates for public office, sit in Parliament, or take commissions in the military, and their freedoms were restricted in other ways. *The Peter Plymley Letters*, of which Sydney published ten in all, were addressed to their pseudonymously named author's putative brother, a bumpkin Church of England parson named Abraham who held all the stock prejudices about Catholics of the day, prominently included among them a terror that the Pope was perpetually on the verge of invading England. ("God bless you, reverend Abraham," ends the first letter, "and defend you from the Pope.") Although Sydney only much later owned up to the authorship of *The Peter Plymley Letters*, everyone seemed to have agreed that the work had too many fine Smithian touches to have been written by anyone else. The satire is said to have kept him from ever gaining a bishopric; certainly the enemies it made him—the Tory Prime Minister Canning and his Foreign Secretary Perceval among them—remained enemies for life. But, as Sydney Smith himself put it, "If I could see good measures pursued, I care not a farthing who is in power; but I have a passionate love for common justice, and for

common sense, and I abhor and despise every man who builds up his political fortune upon their ruin.”

Sydney Smith, it must be understood, had no particular love for Catholics. He never attacked Catholicism, though, no doubt because the civic position of adherents of that religion in England were so vulnerable. But he did blast away at those Christians who set out to convert the Hindus in India, and for the Methodist notion that God intervenes to distribute perfect justice in the life of every man or woman he had the keenest contempt, which he didn’t in the least mind expressing. “The honest and orthodox method is to prepare young people for the world, as it actually exists; to tell them that they will often find vice perfectly successful, virtue exposed to a long train of afflictions; that they must bear this patiently, and look to another world for its rectification.”

Wherever or whenever common sense is outraged, so is Sydney Smith, and so he is entirely out of sympathy with the pleasure-hating element of Methodism, or for that matter of any other religion. “*Ennui*, wretchedness, melancholy, groans and sighs, are the offerings which these unhappy men make to a Deity, who has covered the earth with gay colours, and scented it with rich perfumes; and shown us, by the plan and order of his works, that he has given to man something better than a bare existence, and scattered over his creation a thousand superfluous joys, which are totally unnecessary to the mere support of life.” Sydney viewed religion as a source of comfort and hope, which filled the heart with charity and gentleness for others. He thought religion provided a means for current contentment and future salvation, when rightly practiced—which is to say, when practiced with benevolence and good sense. But even when wrongly practiced—when demons and witches were brought into play, when God was thought to dispense penalties and rewards for discrete human acts or held to approve human miseries and privations—he nonetheless felt that even such religion deserved toleration, if no dispensation from

ridicule, which, as he wrote on one occasion, “is excusable, when there is no other [way] that can make fools tremble.”

The Lord, in his abundance, provided fools aplenty outside the realm of religion. Most of Sydney Smith’s writings in the *Edinburgh Review*, apart from those on religious subjects, were on political and social matters. As in religion, so in politics, his was the line of common sense. That he was all his days a Whig made him, *mutatis mutandis*, what in our day would be a liberal, but without any of the contemporary liberal’s terror of seeming unvirtuous by finding himself on the wrong—which is to say, not the Left—side of any political issue, question, or cause. W. H. Auden, citing Sydney Smith as “an example of English Liberalism at its best,” went on to say that he was never doctrinaire.³ Auden illustrates his point by setting out examples, both from religion, in which Sydney was in one case favoring reform and in another opposing it. But examples elsewhere are not at all difficult to find. He was, to mention one such example, against early self-government for Australia on the grounds that the Australians, in 1823, are still “too young, too few, and too deficient for such civilized machinery at present.” Always specific, he set out his reasons:

“I cannot come to serve upon the jury—the waters of Hawkesbury are out, and I have a mile to swim—the kangaroos will break into my corn—the convicts have robbed me—my little boy has been bitten by an *ornithorynchus paradoxus*—I have sent a man fifty miles with a sack of flour to buy a pair of breeches for the assizes, and he is not yet returned.” These are the excuses which, in new colonies, always prevent Trial by Jury; and make it desirable, for the first half century of their existence, that they should live under the simplicity and convenience of despotism—such modified despotism (we mean) as a British House of Commons will

3 Auden edited, and wrote an introduction to, *Selected Writings of Sydney Smith* (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1956).

permit, in the governors of their distant colonies.

Close though he was to the Whigs through his Holland House connection and his friendship with Lord and Lady Grey, Sydney was at once a firm party man and, within party circles, someone who insisted on the rights of criticizing his party and viewing it through the lens of superior perspective. Not few were the social and political abuses of Sydney Smith's day, and several were the defenders of those abuses, and sundry those who stood to gain from their perpetuation. With his common sense and power of ridicule, Sydney was beautifully equipped to chide, mock, scorn, and *ziddle* the party in power. As the punishment ought to fit the crime, so ought the talent the time, and given Sydney's talent and the time in which he lived, he could only have been among the Whigs. As George Saintsbury says: "Except that the sentimental side of Toryism would never have appealed to him, it was chiefly an accident of time that he was a polemical Liberal. He would always and naturally have been on the side opposite to that on which most of the fools were." Sydney Smith was of that permanent minority, the party perpetually out of power, the Party of Common Sense.

"The whole of my life has passed," wrote Sydney Smith, "like a razor—in hot water or a scrape." (Nobody better than Sydney at what one might call the delayed punch-line simile: "Correspondences are like small-clothes before the invention of suspenders," he wrote, "it is impossible to keep them up.") In an age ruled by patronage and preferment, the expression of strong opinion was free in name only; in fact, if one were on the wrong side, there was a price to be paid. It was, wrote Sydney, "an awful period for those who ventured to maintain liberal opinions; and who were too honest to sell them for the ermine of the judge, or the lawn of the prelate." Those who felt themselves compelled to issue such opinions could look forward to "a long and hopeless career in

your profession, the chuckling grin of noodles, the sarcastic leer of the genuine political rogue; prebendaries, deans, bishops, made over your head; reverend renegades advanced to the highest dignities of the Church, for helping to rivet the fetters of Catholic and Protestant Dissenters; and no more chance of a Whig administration than of a thaw in Zembla."

Yet if the penalties are plain, why take up the certain risk of incurring them? Life is short, the afterlife from such sketchy reports as we have tremendously long, and in politics, unlike in physics, great causes tend to have very small effects; and all this being so, why not cultivate one's garden, do what one can to advance one's career, take the money and run, or, in the case of a talented cleric like Sydney Smith, the bishop's mitre and walk? In 1824, when Sydney Smith was fifty-three years old, something like this question was put to him by his friend Lord Carlisle. Carlisle wrote to him to recount how many enemies his writings had made, and to remind him to "for God's sake consider that what often is forgiven from the *tongue* is not endured from the *pen*." Carlisle concluded on an admonitory note: "Retire from the dangerous enterprise. Why prepare for yourself a bed of thorns for that hour when one of down might hardly invite repose?" To Lord Carlisle's quite sensible question of why make enemies when there is not an absolute need to?—it is a question that everyone who writes must ask himself—Sydney's response seems to me bang on the money. Assuming, he replies, that his attacks are made with "a mixture of argument and pleasantry which commands attention and produces a strong effect—what are the advantages to the writer?"

The successful exercise of power in the promotion of truth and justice: the advancement of good principles and the destruction of bad ones; emersion from darkness and obscurity; the sincere friendship of many good men, who agree with his opinions, honour his courage, respect his honesty and are grateful to him for the triumphant statement of their

own argument and the successful development of their own thoughts.

Sydney concluded his answer by remarking that, but for the writing that so alarms him at the moment, Lord Carlisle should never have known him in the first place, nor should he, Sydney Smith, be "writing familiarly to a nobleman of the most cultivated talents and of the highest rank, about myself and my own concerns."

Sheer ebullience might be all the cause and motive required to explain Sydney Smith's need for the regular assertion of his opinions. It was from this ebullience, his almost endless flow of lively conversation, that Sydney Smith's reputation as one of the great English talkers derived. Even considering the main competition—the thundering pronouncements of Samuel Johnson, the metaphor-strewn periods of Edmund Burke, the oratorical pyrotechnics of Lord Brougham, the elegant epigrams of Oscar Wilde—Sydney Smith's talk sounds as if it might have given the greatest pleasure of all. Laughter was the intention of most of his talk, and laughter it usually achieved: "It is his condition to be witty," said Guizot, "as it is that of Lady Seymour to be beautiful."

"The fanciful and inexhaustible humorous drollery of his conversation among his intimates can never be adequately rendered or reproduced," Fanny Kemble claimed. As a talker, Sydney apparently did more than merely scatter *mots* about the room, though his *mots* have been remembered in ample number: there are fifty-three Sydney Smith items in the most recent *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, some drawn from his writings but many recollected later by friends and memoirists in social tranquility. Much of what he said reflected his own unmitigated worldliness, such as his remarking that "if a messenger from heaven were on a sudden to annihilate the love of power, the love of wealth, the love of esteem, in the hearts of men, the streets of London would be as empty and silent at noon as they are now in the middle of the night." Nor did he dominate by garrulity, as did Macaulay,

whom Sydney once called "a book in breeches"; another time, finding Macaulay still in bed, he said of his conversation that it contained "some gorgeous flashes of silence." Sydney never set out to monopolize conversation; it rather monopolized him, as Richard Monckton Milnes reported, for his reputation as a wit, like his increasingly spreading stomach, preceded him. So great was this reputation that while he was about there was very little inclination on anyone else's part to talk. With George Gershwin in the house, who, after all, would have had the nerve to sit down at the piano?

Sydney Smith's conversational style apparently resembled what we should nowadays call "being on a roll." Someone would say something that struck his fancy, and he would be off, building a vast conceit upon it composed of anecdotes, puns, wild observations, oddities of language, all ending in a delightfully comic piece. One of his contemporaries, a Mrs. Brookfield, claimed that, along with Sydney's avoirdupois, he had "a mouth like an oyster, and three double chins." The diarist Charles Greville noted: "His appearance, voice and manner added immensely to the effect, and the bursting and uproarious merriment with which he poured forth his good things, never failed to communicate itself to his audience, who were always in fits of laughter." About the laughter, there was no question; the poet Thomas Moore, comparing another wit of the day, Henry Luttrell, with Sydney Smith, remarked that "after the former, you remember what good things he said, and after the latter you merely remember how much you laughed."

"If there was a fault in it," Charles Greville noted in his diary shortly after Sydney Smith's death, "it was that it was too amusing." Greville himself had "very little doubt that Sydney often felt oppressed with the weight of his comical obligations, and came onto the stage like a great actor, forced to exert himself, but not always in the vein to play his part." Whether or not this is true is difficult to gauge. For a natural entertainer the only thing worse than to be asked to sing

for his supper is not to be asked to sing at all. Some artists aim for prosperity and others for posterity, but Sydney Smith's chief aim, at least in his talk, was to bestow pleasure. "I talk only the nonsense of the moment for the good humour of the moment," he wrote in his seventy-second year to one of his many female correspondents, "and nothing remains behind, no more is known of the Constitution of the Germanic Empire, than if I had never dined there."

Sydney Smith was an apostle, a positive ideologue of good cheer. He was, in this aspect of his life and career, a subtler and wittier version of Benjamin Franklin, a writer he much admired. In his perhaps most famous letter—and he had occasion to indite various versions of it to others—he provided Lady Georgiana Morpeth with twenty quite specific steps for throwing off the heavy harness of depression. These run from "1st. Live as well as you dare" and "2nd. Go into the shower-bath with a small quantity of water at a temperature low enough to give you a slight sensation of cold, 75° or 80°" to "8th. Make no secret of low spirits to your friends, but talk of them freely—they are always the worse for dignified concealment" and "17th. Don't be too severe upon yourself, or underrate yourself, but do yourself justice." The most notable, and perhaps the most helpful, item, however, is "4th. Short views of human life—not further than dinner or tea." This excellent letter, it is well to remember, begins, "Nobody has suffered more from low spirits than I have done—so I feel for you."

"Take short views"—that sentence pops up more than once in Sydney Smith's letters and in his journalism. It was advice he had need of in his own life, which knew no paucity of reversals. As a young clergyman, he was, in the root sense of the word, rusticated to backwoods parishes—"twelve miles from a lemon," as he described one. He lived most of his days under the lash of financial worry. When the Whigs came briefly into power, he was overlooked for a bishopric, which he claimed did not bother him, though clearly it did. His youngest son, Wyndham, turned out

a ne'er-do-well. Most shattering of all, his most talented child, his son Douglas, died when he was in his early twenties and Sydney and his wife in their late fifties. He wrote the following inscription for the young man's gravestone: "His life was blameless. His death was the first sorrow he ever occasioned his parents, but it was deep and lasting." To the London hostess Maria Kinnaird he wrote, apropos of his son's death: "I am very unhappy, and quite beaten but I shall get better."

And he did soon get better, on his prescription of taking short views and not forgetting that happiness depends mainly on little things: enjoying specific pleasures ("a comfortable house is a great source of happiness. It ranks immediately after health and a good conscience"); finding delight in the present moment (while visiting historical sites when abroad, he claimed "the *aujourd'hui* of Life is enough for me"); never neglecting animal spirits ("I am convinced digestion is the great secret of life"); and adoring life ("I have a contempt for persons who destroy themselves") while not anticipating too much from it ("the whole of Life is a trumpery business—do not expect any great things from it, it will deceive you if you do"). Sydney was a parson who practiced what he preached. "Our house," he wrote five years before his death to Mrs. Grote, wife of the great historian, "is full of beef, beer, young children, newspapers, libels, and mince pies, and life goes on very well, except that I am often reminded I am too near the end of it." But his guiding principle appears to have been: "Pleasure is very reflective, and if you give it you will feel it." He gave it in vaster quantities than any man of his time.

Does Sydney Smith continue to give pleasure in our time? Sad to report that his formal writings do not provide the same delight in our day than they must have done in his own. In large part, this is owing to his subject matter and the nature of his intentions. Much the greater part of his writing was given over to polemic—to

arguing, to making a case, to banging heads—and polemic on subjects of once great but now merely antique interest. One of his most perfectly executed essays is “Spring Guns and Man Traps,” in which he sets out to show the inhumane villainy of squires positioning guns to go off automatically to prevent poaching on their lands. “The best way of answering a bad argument is not to stop it,” Sydney writes in that essay, “but to let it go on its course till it leaps over the boundaries of common sense,” which is what he artfully does. It’s a fine little piece of work, this essay; and one can recommend it without hesitation to anyone amongst one’s friends who is currently having problems with poachers, if you take my point.

The polemical tradition is not without its glittering names: Richard Hooker, Swift, Milton (in some of his prose works), and, closer to our time, George Orwell. Just about every other English and American prose writer who was in the least *engagé*—Hazlitt, Macaulay, Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, J. S. Mill, Thoreau, and T. S. Eliot, among others—has in his career felt the need to write polemic. But those who write polemic nearly exclusively face the danger of their own writing dying along with the issues that brought it forth. This, regrettably, has happened to much of Sydney Smith’s writing. One of his most smoothly executed, liltily argued, lengthy pieces of work, for example, is *Letters to Archdeacon Singleton*, which is about the proceedings and constitution of the Ecclesiastical Commission on reform of church organization. Too much of Sydney’s work is similarly hostage to dead subject matter. Throughout everything he wrote one finds delicious passages, touches, turns, ornamentation in sufficient quantity to decorate the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, but now hung, in his three volumes of collected writings, for the most part on quite bare boughs.

This explains why Sydney Smith is less and less frequently anthologized. Instead his name, inscribed under charming remarks notable for their common-sensicality,

appears in collections of aphorisms, books of quotations, slender volumes of wise and witty sayings. His essays may even have passed outside the wide range of interest of Samuel Johnson’s and Virginia Woolf’s honorifically named Common Reader. These essays may now be readable only for that band of readers absorbed by questions of literary style that Henry James, in his story “The Next Time,” referred to as “partakers of the same repose, who sit together in the shade of the tree, by the plash of the fountain, with the glare of the desert round us and no great vice that I know but the habit of perhaps estimating people a little too much by what they think of a certain style.” For those who care about style—sheer style, yes, style even detached from content—Sydney Smith’s writing remains immensely readable.

Style was always of the keenest concern to Sydney Smith. “It is more tolerable to be slovenly in dress than in style,” he wrote to Miss Georgiana Harcourt. “Dress covers the mortal body, and adorns it, but style is the vehicle of the spirit.” Style and wit and common sense were all intertwined in him. “The pleasure arising from wit,” he wrote, “proceeds from our surprise at suddenly discovering two things to be similar, in which we suspected no similarity. [Aristotle claimed the same pleasure for metaphor.] Practical wit discovers connection between actions, in which duller understanding discovers none.” He was himself powerfully adept at arguing by analogy, parable, fable, quietly demonstrating the fundamental good sense of his own side by setting out the absurdity of the other, making seemingly whimsical connections that were at bottom usually quite serious. In *The Peter Plymley Letters*, for example, he noted that it struck him as foolhardy to antagonize the Catholics and that perhaps England would do better to find a weaker group to pick on. “Cruelty and injustice must, of course, exist: but why connect them with danger? Why torture a bulldog, when you can get a frog or a rabbit?” One of his analogies, likening an English housewife (whom he named Dame

Partington) mopping her stoop during a ferocious storm to the efforts of the Tories to hold back parliamentary reform, made its way into *The Times* and was said to have been contributory to the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832.

Sydney Smith's fecundity in this line is most impressive. But then anyone who relies on common sense inevitably falls back upon analogy. Presented with an assertion or even a fairly elaborate argument, a common-sensical thinker asks how does this compare with that; isn't this rather as if . . .; if that is the case, doesn't it follow that . . .; and isn't what is being said here really like . . .? If the common-sensical thinker is also imaginative, he fills in those ellipses with strikingly home-ly analogies. "If men had made no more progress in the common arts of life than they have in education," Sydney wrote, "we should at this moment be dividing our food with our fingers, and drinking out of the palms of our hands." And if the common-sensical thinker has into the bargain a sense of style and an eye for comic elaboration, he is likely to hit upon tropes such as Sydney came upon in describing a verbose historian: "He has not the talent of saying what he has to say quickly; nor is he aware that brevity is in writing what charity is to all other virtues. Righteousness is worth nothing without the one, nor authorship without the other."

Along with Sydney Smith's gifts of clear common sense and inventive wit ran a happy taste for whimsy and nonsense. Strong common sense, after all, confers an immediate penetration into nonsense; and wit turns it all to charming advantage, generally in the form of whimsy. "Lucy, dear child," he writes to the daughter of friends, "mind your arithmetic. You know, in the first sum of yours I ever saw, there was a mistake. You had carried two (as a cab is licensed to do) and you ought, dear Lucy, to have carried but one." But he does not restrict whimsy of this kind to children. Of his hay fever, he reports to his physician son-in-law: "The membrane is so irritable, that light, dust, contradiction, an absurd remark, the sight

of a dissenter,—anything, sets me a sneezing and if I begin sneezing at 12, I don't leave off until two o'clock—and am heard distinctly in Taunton when the wind sets that way at a distance of 6 miles." When Malthus, the population man, pays a visit, he, Sydney, writes to Lady Holland:

I got an agreeable party for him of unmarried people. There was only one Lady who had had a Child, and for her I apologised, saying nothing of a recent misfortune; but he is a very good natured man, and if there are no appearances of approaching fertility is civil to every Lady.

A Sydney Smith letter must have arrived like a gift. Each conveys not solely information but a touch or two of gratuitous delight. Few fail to contain a joke. Certain themes recur, such as the interest of clerics in digestion, or his boredom with the country, which he considers "a sort of healthy Grave." Even his complaints are charming. Suffering from gout, that malady that awaited every heavy victualizing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Englishman, he describes it as akin "to walking on your eyeballs" and writes that "it is the only enemy I do not wish to have at my feet." When four first cousins who are visiting fall ill and stay with the Smiths for three weeks, he reports, "'Oh that those first Cousins were but *once removed*' was my constant exclamation." An amiable generosity lies behind these little constructions; made to give pleasure to others, they doubtless also gave great pleasure to the man who fabricated them.

But the effect of reading Sydney Smith, in his essays and letters, and of contemplating his life, goes beyond pleasure alone. While under the spell of his immensely common-sensical charm, the desperate doctrines of Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, and other intellectually rambunctious thinkers seem so much unfortunate lunacy. They are not lunacy, of course, not completely at any rate, but it is useful to consider them in the clean, clear light of common sense to get them in

better focus. It is useful in the same way that it was useful to have Max Beerbohm, after acknowledging D. H. Lawrence's power as a novelist, go on to say: "He never realized, don't you know—he never suspected that to be stark, staring mad is somewhat of a handicap to a writer." Beerbohm, on his seventieth birthday, upon re-reading some of his own writing, remarked that "what especially struck me was that I had always had a great deal of common sense. It is a far less noble, but a far more useful thing than wisdom." Not only is common sense useful, but without it life quickly comes to seem blurred, misshapen, more than a little monstrous.

For Sydney Smith, who was never without common sense in the highest degree, life, no matter what setbacks it provided, always seemed full of interest, amusement, delight. Knowing always where he stood, he knew always what to laugh at, and had the sweet talent to make others laugh along with him. How splendid it would be today to hear him on such subjects as the female clergy, the politics of the Church of England, contemporary academics, television journalists, and much modern psychotherapy!

In Sydney Smith's late years, he came into a large inheritance from one of his brothers, and acquired a very handsome ecclesiastical living when appointed Canon of St. Paul's. As he grew old, his health inevitably declined and with it his energy—"I am seventy-two years of age," he wrote to Harriet Martineau, "at which period there comes over one a

shameful love of ease and repose, common to dogs, horses, clergymen, and even to *Edinburgh Reviewers*"—but large reserves of wit remained. In response to a French-Belgian poet named Eugène Robin, who was preparing what we should nowadays call a profile of him for the *Revue des deux mondes*, Sydney wrote:

I am seventy-four years of age; and being Canon of St. Paul's in London, and a rector of a parish in the country, my time is divided equally between town and country. I am living amongst the best society in the Metropolis, and at ease in my circumstances; in tolerable health, a mild Whig, a tolerating Churchman, and much given to talking, laughing, and noise. I dine with the rich in London, and physic the poor in the country; passing from the saucers of Dives to the sores of Lazarus. I am, upon the whole, a happy man; have found the world an entertaining world, and am thankful to Providence for the part allotted to me in it.

Less than a year later, on February 22, 1845, Sydney Smith died, peacefully, in his house on Green Street in London, the city he once referred to as "the Spot I am convinced where all the Evils of Life are soonest forgotten and most easily endured." These evils must have seemed less easily endured to his friends with Sydney dead. Thinking about him today, the lightness of being becomes, somehow, quite bearable. Life, most assuredly, is no joke; but consider what, without a joke, one imagines Sydney Smith readily rejoining, life would be like.

False cinema: Dziga Vertov and early Soviet film

by *Jeremy Murray-Brown*

As the Soviets struggle with yet another rewriting of their history, questions must soon be raised about the role of those who undertook to sell the old, now discredited, history through various forms of artistic propaganda. In this respect, it will be interesting to see what happens to the reputation of the early Soviet filmmakers who are acclaimed in Western film histories as having revolutionized the art of film much as Lenin revolutionized the art of politics. Since these Soviet filmmakers were active propagandists for the Stalinist system, reappraisal of their artistic claims has long been necessary.

Of particular interest to students of propaganda and disinformation is the attention Western film texts give to a man known as Dziga Vertov, a contemporary of Sergei Eisenstein, who concentrated on the manipulation of actuality, or documentary, images. Few people outside academic film circles will have heard of Vertov. His films were never successful in popular terms, nor did he enjoy the reputation in his lifetime that has subsequently been bestowed on him in textbooks and other film literature.

The general pattern of these writings is to present Vertov as an avant-garde genius who was put down by Stalinist orthodoxy, a filmmaker who shared the same vision as Lenin when Communism, so the Khrushchev/Gorbachev thesis runs, not only had a human face but a face brightly lit with revolutionary art. This thesis itself is due for

reappraisal; meanwhile there is clear evidence that the present-day interest shown by some in the West in the half-forgotten figure of a Dziga Vertov stems more from politics than aesthetics, forming part of a program advanced by activists in what they call radical filmmaking. In keeping with this program, many of these activists have inserted themselves into film study centers, where they promote their political objectives using Vertov's name as an alibi. They have been aided in this enterprise through associating Vertov with the film term *cinéma vérité*, a term which still enjoys a certain *réclame* in some film circles. Thus the concept of *cinéma vérité* and Vertov's role as a Soviet propagandist both merit closer examination.

The life

Virtually all our information about Vertov comes from Soviet sources and is of relatively recent origin. A handful of Westerners sympathetic to the Soviets knew him personally when they visited Moscow in the early 1930s to study cinematic techniques, but they have added little to our knowledge of him. The role of these few Western individuals in helping promote Vertov's name must also form part of our enquiry, but the main biographical facts concerning his life seem agreed on.

Dziga Vertov was born Denis Kaufman, the eldest of three sons of Jewish intellectu-

als from Bialystok, in the Polish territories of the Czarist empire. In 1914 Vertov's parents moved to Moscow, interrupting Vertov's studies in music, in which he might otherwise have made a career. In Moscow, during the fateful years 1914-17, he adopted the name Dziga Vertov, perhaps, as some say, in a youthful gesture of avant-garde adventurism (he was born in 1896), but more plausibly in order to shed his Jewish identity. Vertov briefly contemplated a medical career at a St. Petersburg institute chosen by many Russian Jews because it placed no limit on the number of Jewish applicants. Here he met a fellow Jewish intellectual who also changed his name and soon became well known as Mikhail Koltsov, a Communist Party member and a high-ranking Soviet journalist. In 1918 Koltsov brought Vertov into the Bolshevik regime's fledgling apparatus for controlling film. It seems that an encounter with a newsreel cameraman in 1917, during Russia's brief experience of liberal government, had led to Vertov's being captivated by the ways visual images can be manipulated through camera and editing procedures.

Vertov's apprenticeship in the film business lay in helping to organize into suitable propaganda form film material taken of Red Army activity. He also participated in the mobile propaganda studios which moved by train and steamer through Bolshevik-controlled territory.

In 1919 Vertov's parents emigrated to Paris with his youngest brother, Boris. Born in 1906, Boris Kaufman became a cameraman in France, where he worked for Jean Vigo, eventually making his way to North America. He was the chief cinematographer for Elia Kazan's famous picture *On the Waterfront*.

Vertov's other brother, Mikhail, one year his junior, took up still photography in the Red Army and became a movie cameraman when the Civil War was over. Vertov, Mikhail Kaufman, and a film editor, Elizaveta Svilova (whom Vertov married in 1923), engaged in polemics about the nature of cinematic reality, calling themselves a

"Council of Three." The trio worked together on several films.

With the end of the Civil War and the switch in Bolshevik tactics to the New Economic Policy, Vertov turned to the production of periodic releases of "newsreels" which he called *Kinopravda*, the cinematic equivalent of the Party paper. Between 1922 and 1925 it seems that some twenty-three of these propaganda pieces were produced, most of them running for ten to fifteen minutes, although it is not clear how they were distributed and shown publicly, if indeed they ever were on a consistent basis. From a fragment preserved at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it would appear that they were sometimes shown in the street in an ad hoc manner by Vertov and his unit themselves, the screen being suspended from overhead trolley lines. Some may have played occasionally in workers' clubs and neighborhood reading rooms.

From short pieces organized around the concept of a newsreel, Vertov advanced to longer films in the same propaganda style, undertaken at the behest of state agencies. At the same time he threw himself into a furious battle against the new generation of Soviet film directors over the merits of his brand of "nonfiction" propaganda versus their form of fictional realism. Vertov never overcame his first experience of Russian peasants as audiences. The peasants, Vertov noticed from his place on government propaganda trains, mistrusted all graphic representations of reality, especially posters on the side of Agitprop rail cars. It was only when they saw on the screen a "real" tractor or horse that they showed interest, Vertov believed. He argued, therefore, that the most effective images for purposes of indoctrination were those drawn from actual life. But it was also obvious that Russian audiences, like audiences everywhere, loved fictional entertainment. In Soviet cinemas the demand for American and European films was overwhelming. So much so, according to Vertov, that if ordinary people caught sight of a newsreel camera, they would

immediately behave as if they were in a Western movie.

In 1927, the state film studio in Moscow where Vertov was employed fired him, having grown tired of his posturing and the friction he generated in the industry. Vertov was obliged to seek work in the state studio of the Ukraine, where he produced two of the longer films that have now gained something of a following in the West: *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) and *Enthusiasm, Symphony of the Don Basin* (1931), one of the first Soviet films to use sound.

Vertov's name was virtually unknown outside the Soviet Union before 1929. But in that year and again in 1931 he visited a number of European cities, screening some of his films to small gatherings of avant-garde artists and film enthusiasts, many of them Communists or Soviet sympathizers. His trips outside the Soviet Union were part of a new propaganda offensive in which other Soviet filmmakers like Eisenstein and Pudovkin were also involved. Profiting from his compatriots' reputation, Vertov won the goodwill of professional colleagues like Chaplin, René Clair, and Moholy-Nagy.

Returning to Moscow in 1932, Vertov was taken on by the studio that specialized in Soviet external propaganda, Mezhrabpomfilm, one of the ventures of the German Communist entrepreneur Willi Münzenberg. Here Vertov produced his last major film, *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934), to mark the tenth anniversary of Lenin's death. For this piece of work Vertov was awarded the Red Star, but he was unable to win his way back into official favor, perhaps because of his ideas about filmmaking, which the Party found unconvincing; perhaps because, despite his name change, he was marked as a Jewish intellectual at a time when Stalin was liquidating people with such connections; or perhaps because Vertov's panegyrics to Lenin were not, after all, so welcome to Stalin. *Three Songs of Lenin* was later re-edited to include pictures of Stalin at key points in the film and with a new ending entirely given over to Stalin. Vertov, however, returned to ordinary newsreel

work, fortunate to escape Stalin's purges. He died in obscurity of cancer in 1954, his films forgotten and long out of circulation.

The reputation

Vertov's biography, sparsely documented as it is, provides no obvious explanation for his status as a cult figure in some Western film studies. In the late 1950s, however, his name reappeared in Soviet publications, a result, perhaps, of Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956 denouncing Stalin's crimes and the thaw in Soviet life that followed. The first Soviet book on Vertov was published in 1962, followed in 1966 by a Soviet edition of his selected writings dating back to the early 1920s. This edition drew extensively upon material preserved by Vertov's widow. An East German translation of the Soviet edition of 1966 appeared the next year; since then translations of selected items in other languages, French and English to the fore, have grown in frequency.

Meanwhile the first comprehensive history of Soviet films, *Kino* by Jay Leyda, which was published in 1960, included scattered references to Vertov, whom Leyda had met when he attended film school in Moscow in 1933-34. Leyda paid tribute to Vertov as a pioneer in the use of actuality images, crediting him with a poetic feeling for this kind of film. In France, also in the 1960s, a new wave of film directors discovered an interest in Vertov's theories, translating Vertov's term *Kinopravda* into the French *cinéma vérité*, whence it attached itself to a documentary mode that for a while enjoyed considerable success on television in America and Britain. In 1963 Georges Sadoul, a Marxist film critic of long standing, published a bio-filmography of Vertov in *Cahiers du cinéma*, together with a translation of one of his manifestos. In these and other pieces Sadoul promoted Vertov's reputation and the *kinopravda-cinéma vérité* connection. In 1967 the first retrospective of Vertov's films took place in Austria.

During the 1960s, then, Vertov's posthumous reputation grew exponentially with

the expansion of film studies. By 1974, when Erik Barnouw's history of the "nonfiction" film was published, entitled *Documentary*, he saw fit to devote fourteen pages of text and illustrations to Vertov, a proportion matched only by his segment on Robert Flaherty, the American documentary filmmaker best known for his film about the Eskimos, *Nanook of the North* (1922). With the Soviet Union now releasing Vertov films to archives and circulating libraries, the secondary literature promoting their use upgraded Vertov's stature even further. One American film catalogue described him as "the father of the documentary film, and aside from Eisenstein the most powerful personality in Soviet film history," while in the catalogue of New York's Museum of Modern Art we can read, "The Soviet film maker and theorist Dziga Vertov is now recognized alongside Robert Flaherty as a major progenitor of the documentary."

Most film instructors and students are likely to be impressed by such statements, bearing as they do institutional authority and supported, as they can be, by testimonials from the few Westerners who knew Vertov in Moscow in the 1930s. In *Kino*, Leyda wrote that Vertov has "a permanent place in all film history," while Herbert Marshall, a British purveyor of Soviet film culture for more than half a century, has described him as "the documentary genius of the Russian Revolution, who influenced the whole world of documentary film."

Finally in 1984 a selection of Vertov's writings including many polemical pieces was published in an English translation by the University of California Press with the title *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*,¹ edited by Annette Michelson, an instructor at New York University and one of the founding editors of *October*, a magazine named for Eisenstein's 1928 film. In a lengthy introduction, in the arcane language

deemed appropriate for this kind of work, Michelson elevated Vertov to a pitch of unrivaled intellectual and artistic grandeur; his destiny, according to her, was to have been the Trotsky, but alas not the Lenin, of cinema. "Of all the great innovators of Soviet cinema, none speaks so directly to issues of our time as Dziga Vertov"—says the blurb on the back cover of this publication, while inside Michelson writes:

The evolution of his work renders insistently concrete, as in a series of kinetic icons, that philosophic phantasm of the reflexive consciousness: the eye seeing, apprehending itself as it constitutes the world's visibility: the eye transformed by the revolutionary project into an agent of critical production.

Revolutionary projects, it's clear, transform minds into exceptionally uncritical objects. It's hardly to be wondered at if the Soviets, seeing in Western academic fields such fertile soil for artistic disinformation, co-operate in the release of select documents by or about Vertov and make some of his films available for study.

But the texts that the Soviets have provided enable us at least to clarify some important points about Vertov, important, that is, now that his name has entered Western textbooks in this uncritical manner. It is clear, for example, that Vertov saw himself primarily as a protagonist in a political battle, whose field of action was film:

The Council of Three [Vertov, his wife, and his brother], basing itself politically on the communist program, is striving to instill cinema with the ideas underlying Leninism . . .

With the skillful organization of factual footage, we can create film-objects of *high propagandistic pressure* . . .

In the area of vision: the facts . . . are organized by film editors according to party instructions . . .

There is no question, then, that Vertov

¹ *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, edited with an introduction by Annette Michelson. Translated from the Russian by Kevin O'Brien. University of California Press, 344 pages, \$14.95 (paperback).

saw himself as a dutiful servant of the Party. He writes elsewhere that the film screen was a “platform” onto which “soviet reality” was to be projected. This “soviet reality” was the “communist decoding of the world,” a favorite phrase with Vertov.

Vertov’s main pitch in the polemical battles he waged against his colleagues who were making fiction films was a remark attributed to Lenin by Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik commissar of education, in which Lenin appeared to favor newsreel propaganda as a means of indoctrinating the masses. Let them enjoy some bourgeois-style entertainment, the argument ran, to entice them into movie theaters, and then hit them with Communist propaganda by way of “factual” films. Vertov’s idea, which he claimed was Lenin’s also, for these “factual” films was “the screen newspaper,” the “political newsreel,” the “propagandistic newsreel.” Vertov called this propagandistic newsreel *Kinopravda*, a movie version of the Party paper *Pravda*. Literally translated, this comes out in American English as *movietruth*, in French as *cinéma vérité*. But by it Vertov intended only to use the name of the Party’s paper to lend standing to his “newsreel,” not to invest his work with a genuine philosophy of cinematic reality.

Nevertheless, it has turned out happily for Soviet disinformation tacticians that the literal rendering of *kinopravda* into English and French has diverted attention from its first association with the Bolshevik Party paper and so enabled Vertov to be presented as an original seeker after documentary truth. The opposite is in fact the case. In his polemics against fiction films (“poison,” “film-moonshine,” “film vodka,” a “hellish idea” invented by the bourgeoisie “to entertain the masses”) Vertov advocated capturing “life as it is,” by which he meant filming unstaged, that is, unscripted, scenes and scenes where ordinary people are not obviously reacting to the presence of the camera. These unstaged and unself-conscious images were Vertov’s “facts”—“film facts,” he called them. They constituted

his raw material, which was then to be edited (“according to party instructions”) into a visual statement. It was not necessary for the raw material to be edited in the context in which it was shot; quite the reverse. The “film facts” were to be stored away and used whenever the need for a particular shot might arise. They went into a file, as it were, which Vertov called his “creative stockpile,” to be available for each new project.

One of Vertov’s trademarks was, in fact, the frequency with which he recycled individual shots and even entire sequences, including titles, in different films. What Vertov had in mind was not the building up of a regular stock shot library, but the centralization of all actuality (nonfiction) filming so that a repertoire of images could be accumulated (under his control) for any doctrinal purpose. If Vertov’s approach suggests anything, it points forward to the secret cameras used by the KGB today to fabricate images for blackmail and disinformation. In one revealing passage Vertov almost said as much:

The work of the movie camera [he meant a candid camera approach to filming] is reminiscent of the work of agents of the GPU [forerunners of the KGB].

Thus Vertov’s visual statements were to be statements of pure ideology with no connection to the world of actual events or to the people who supplied the models for his images in the first place. His use of the phrase “life as it is” was a Leninist code word meaning “the communist decoding of the world.” Vertov’s film language was the visual equivalent of Communist verbal texts; they meant the opposite of what people uninitiated into the code understood by them. (And we must remind ourselves that it was not until the publication of Orwell’s *1984* in 1949 that ordinary people had an inkling of the way Communist doubletalk worked.) “Life as it is” meant precisely “life as isn’t”; namely, a screen utopia dressed up in the appearances of reality. Not the fantasy of fiction film, to be sure, but the fantasy of

“film facts,” a more demoralizing fantasy because every viewer of these “facts” in the Soviet Union knew them to be false. Soviet viewers, if there were any, had to experience the daily, grim, real version of “life as it is” in the catastrophe brought upon Russia by Lenin and his heirs. Small wonder, then, that Vertov’s films failed as internal propaganda and were shelved; small wonder that Soviet audiences flocked to Western films when they got the chance.

But it is for his avant-garde experiments in a new art form, it is often said, that Vertov should be remembered. As is well known, during the first years of Bolshevik rule Russia produced a glittering array of writers, poets, and artists. Most of them, however, quickly understood what lay ahead, even before Lenin’s death. One history takes the view that avant-garde enthusiasm in the Revolution had died by the end of 1921, following the death of the poet Alexander Blok. But certainly the suicide in April 1930 of Mayakovsky—who had been among the most exuberant of the new regime’s supporters—may be taken as the final blow to artistic hope.

Vertov had clung to Mayakovsky’s coattails, claiming that he was producing “poetic documentary” in the new medium of film. And Mayakovsky in turn encouraged Vertov. But we cannot seriously compare Vertov’s talent with Mayakovsky’s. Vertov’s style was the rhetoric of Party propaganda, leading one to suspect that his invoking of avant-garde license was no more than a cover for political hackwork. Vertov’s devotion to the regime was never in doubt; throughout his career he remained a Party-line man. He would have aligned himself with Mayakovsky and other hard-liners when they called for “a literary Cheka” to deal with independent spirits like Bulgakov and Zamyatin. Nor did Vertov dissent from the Soviet film directors, Eisenstein included, who in 1928 called for “firm ideological dictatorship in the field of cinema.” Later in life, when he was virtually forgotten, his diary shows a certain wistful plea for artistic

talent (presumably his own), but in the period in which he was actively engaged in propaganda work, Vertov’s stance is that of a dutiful Soviet operative.

The English-language volume of Vertov’s writings, then, reveals a person lacking in intellectual depth and untroubled by moral doubts. As a young man, Vertov embraced Communism without hesitation, as members of the Hitler youth embraced Nazism, and his adulation of the leader, Lenin in his case, remained undiminished until his own death. Vertov does not emerge from his own texts as an artistic free spirit crushed by orthodoxy but as a man whose early enthusiasm for a new medium, film, never matured. As is the case with many intellectuals attracted to the mass media, Vertov displayed contempt for his audience. For him, as for so many others, the attraction was power.

Two films

If Vertov’s influence on the documentary idea was as significant as his present-day admirers would have us believe, we must look for evidence in his films. Collections of these are to be found in several archives outside the Soviet Union. The Soviets began making them available toward the end of the 1960s, doctoring the films as a matter of course before releasing them. In the United States one of the best collections is in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, an institution that gave active support to the documentary idea in the 1930s. The museum has six Vertov films, a holding of such unusual size as to invite the question: on whose judgments, and on what grounds, was this acquisition policy decided?

With films generally, great caution is necessary in forming judgments on the basis of written descriptions, and this caution is especially necessary over all material emanating from Soviet sources. Detailed, critical viewing of Vertov’s films is difficult and exhausting; differences in language and culture can give rise to mistaken interpretations and two people may well respond in

opposite ways to the same visual experience. What is at issue here, however, is not aesthetic theory, but truth—the truth behind films that purport to be documentaries.

It's safe to say that few of the film instructors who repeat Vertov's praises have seen many of his films; fewer still, one might add, are sufficiently knowledgeable of Soviet history to be able to evaluate them in their political context. And yet no aesthetic judgments can properly be made without reference to the political context. In this respect, it will be enough to consider here two Vertov films that are available for public circulation through the Museum of Modern Art, *Kinopravda* and *Enthusiasm, Symphony of the Don Basin*.

The Museum of Modern Art's *Kinopravda* film is a composite reel of fragments from several early issues of Vertov's "propagandistic newsreel." They were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s and they seem to be the only *Kinopravda* material of their kind available for public inspection in the United States—indeed, the only *Kinopravda* material from 1922 that anyone has seen. There are six items in this composite reel; the re-opening of a trolley line in Moscow; tanks used in leveling a field, destined, we're told, for an airport, also in Moscow; scenes from the trial of the Social Revolutionaries; an item described as "organizing the peasants to join the commune"; scenes of a sanitarium where war-wounded receive therapy; and shots of starving children huddled close to the railroad. These six items are preceded by a statement by the Museum telling us about *Kinopravda*, followed in turn by a *Kinopravda* title sequence. At the end of the composite reel, we see a group of technicians hoisting a screen onto trolley wires, with captions that read: "For enquiries regarding travelling film shows . . . write to KINOPRAVDA" (no address is given).

Every piece of critical writing on *Kinopravda* to be found in Western textbooks is a judgment on these fragments, amplified by perusal of written lists based on Soviet documents. Vertov produced some

longer issues, to which he gave the *Kinopravda* title, and a film *Kino-Glaz* ("Cinema-Eye," 1924), which seems to duplicate *Kinopravda* material. In each case, however, the essential propaganda forms are conventional.

These hardly constitute grounds for describing Vertov as the founder of "a new kind of journalism." In terms of film technique, the shots in the museum's *Kinopravda* reel are well composed and the editing displays vitality, some sequences having been obviously filmed with editing in mind. Good technique should cause no surprise, however, since by 1922 newsreel camera work was of a high standard everywhere; among operators in the Soviet Union were several who went on to do feature work, Edward Tisse, Eisenstein's cameraman, among them. What should be noted, however, is the evidence of visual continuity displayed in the shooting and editing (different angles on and details of a single piece of action), since visual continuity of this kind is proof not of a hidden or unobserved camera which might illustrate Vertov's so-called "life as it is" but of open intervention by the cameraman in obtaining his material. Not only do you have to instruct your subject how to look, but you have to ask him or her to repeat the action several times over, to wait until you're ready or to keep going until you have finished. In other words, this kind of filming requires its own artifice as does shooting actors in a fiction film. As the Dutch Communist filmmaker Joris Ivens put it after a lifetime's experience: "staging begins when you say to the man, 'Don't look at the camera.'"

While the shots of children in the museum's reel are certainly poignant—they look like concentration-camp victims, and they remind us of the five million lives that were lost in the famine that followed the Bolsheviks' seizure of power—and while we can recognize in the sequence of mutilated patients being fitted with artificial limbs the fascination that machines held for Vertov as for many of his contemporaries in Europe, the fragments in this composite reel tell us

nothing further about their subject matter, nor are they of themselves of historical interest. What is remarkable about the *Kinopravda* series, however, judging from written lists of its contents, is precisely this absence of historically significant material. With the telling exception of the trial of the Social Revolutionaries, *Kinopravda* shows little awareness of the events or the people that were shaping the new Soviet state. To borrow Sherlock Holmes's remark to Watson, it is the absence of the dog barking in the night that provides us with the essential clue to *Kinopravda*. In the whole series, there is virtually no sign of Lenin or his associates at work, nothing to show what was really going on at that time. What *Kinopravda* reveals in this negative fashion is the obsession with secrecy that has from the outset been the hallmark of Soviet rule. Vertov's activities confirm that control of every means of public information has always been a primary objective of Party policy, one that Lenin, more than any other leader, insisted on.

For this reason the appearance of scenes from the trial of the Social Revolutionaries in the Museum of Modern Art's reel of *Kinopravda* is highly significant. According to shot lists based on Soviet sources, Vertov included items dealing with this trial in seven of the first eight issues of *Kinopravda*, an emphasis which draws attention to itself and which must reflect the political instructions that Vertov was following. It is not hard to guess at what lay behind these instructions.

As the major revolutionary party to emerge in Russia before 1917, and the one that played the key role in the events that led to the abdication of the Czar and the formation of a republican government between March and October 1917, the Social Revolutionaries formed the only party that had any popular following among the peasants, who made up the majority of the Russian population. Although they opposed Lenin on certain major issues and were outmaneuvered by the Bolsheviks, who were far fewer in number, the Social Revolutionaries co-operated briefly with the Bolsheviks

and withheld their opposition to them during the Civil War. But once the Civil War was over and Lenin decided to return to a semblance of republican norms with the New Economic Policy, it became essential for the Bolshevik leaders—never popular with the masses and mostly unknown to them—to eliminate their more popular rivals. The Social Revolutionaries had been granted amnesty for their earlier misdeeds, but Lenin had meanwhile arranged for a new criminal code, adopted in May 1922, to come into effect on June 1 the same year. Under this new code a number of leaders of the Social Revolutionaries were immediately arrested. Their trial opened the same month, on June 8, attracting a great deal of international attention. It was, of course, to be a show trial, with Lenin personally involved in the arrangements, which included planting *agents provocateurs* among the defendants. Lenin was the harshest of all in his demands for the death penalty. In August, after two months of public display, the defendants were duly found guilty, fourteen of their number being sentenced to death, a sentence that was "suspended" at the request of foreign Communists.

Is it a coincidence that the opening of the trial coincided with the opening of Vertov's *Kinopravda* and that the first eight issues of his "newsreel" appeared over the ten-week period of the trial, a regularity of appearance never achieved again during *Kinopravda*'s existence? Nor can the item on peasants organizing themselves into a commune, which in the Museum of Modern Art's reel immediately follows the trial scenes, be without significance. At the tenth party conference in 1921, it had been openly stated that the "enormous mass" of peasants were bitterly opposed to the Bolsheviks. Since it was among the peasants that the Social Revolutionaries were strongest, we can assume that Vertov was following Party instructions in these blatantly fabricated scenes, possibly relayed to him by Mikhail Koltsov, who was now influential at *Pravda*. It had been Koltsov, you will remember, who had introduced Vertov to propaganda film

work; it was now Koltsov who promoted Vertov's output in the pages of *Pravda*.

To present Vertov as an avant-garde artist, fired by revolutionary ardor and keen to experiment in a new medium, is therefore manifestly a false reading of the historical situation. Vertov loyally served Party needs. One wonders, indeed, whether to engage in his kind of "documentary" filming Vertov or one of his associates would have had to be part of the secret police apparatus which from 1925, at least, began to interest itself in the production and distribution of propaganda films to local factory and office cells. From his *Kinopravda* reels, Vertov compiled a longer version of the trial of the Social Revolutionaries, an indication of its propaganda importance. That Vertov personally identified himself with the Party line in this trial, fully approving of the fate of the Social Revolutionaries, is evident from a scene included in MOMA's reel. Here Vertov allowed himself to appear in the shot, ostensibly as a bystander reading a newspaper account of the trial proceedings. It should be noted that there is nothing avant-garde about this episode in film history; on the contrary, inserting himself in this way into his own camera's lens was something Vertov theoretically deplored, and this fact charges the scene with ominous symbolism—it is a faked shot at a rigged trial.

In the light of this fact, the Museum of Modern Art's note on its *Kinopravda* reel seems particularly unfortunate:

Vertov sought to exhort his audience, especially to make them aware of social ills, but he invited their participation without explaining or interpreting events for them as did conventional newsreels—even when his subject is a trial of social revolutionaries. Honoring Vertov's example, Jean Rouch translated "kino pravda" into French to give us the term *cinéma vérité*.

Cinéma "falsité" (to coin a word) would be more to the point.

Between 1926 when he made his last film for the state film studio in Moscow and some

time after 1932 when he returned to Moscow to work for Münzenberg's Mezhrabpom Film, Vertov's operational base appears to have been in the Ukraine. One of the films he made during this period, *The Man with the Movie Camera*, is often shown to students because of the technical tricks Vertov used to demonstrate the illusionistic nature of the film medium. He intended the film to be a cinematic statement in support of his brand of propaganda film, an attack on his rivals in the Soviet film industry in the competition for funds and Party favor. While the film is much overpraised by Vertov's Western admirers, and is falsely described by the Museum of Modern Art as "a documentary on the nature of socialist society," it need not detain us now. Its value for disinformation purposes lies in the context in which Vertov himself is presented. But Vertov's next film, also made under the auspices of the Ukraine Film Studio, is a different matter. He called it *Enthusiasm, Symphony of the Don Basin*. Vertov began work on it in the autumn of 1929. It was his first sound film, for which his youthful studies in music and early experiments in sound recording had long prepared him.

Enthusiasm purports to be a picture of how the workers of the Don Basin, the industrial heart of the Ukraine, set about meeting in four years, one year in advance, the target set for them under Stalin's first five-year plan, which was announced in April/May of 1929. But Vertov did not follow the path of realism; instead, his film is a kind of celluloid ode to industry set to music and accompanied by brass bands, parades, and speeches in synchronous sound. At least, this is the central portion of the film, but it opens and closes with sequences that do not obviously belong to the industrial theme.

Early segments of the film concern the Church. Vertov contrasts images of religious worship with images of factory work. The former are ridiculed with swaying camera movements, the latter emphasized by firm shots and strong editing. Church music

is distorted and superseded by factory sirens; a church building is dismantled and turned into a workers' club. Modernity in the form of radio dispels the icons of the past. Vertov shoots scenes of drunks and old women crossing themselves in a visually provocative manner as if we were looking at the church through a drunkard's eyes.

The closing segment of *Enthusiasm* is enigmatic, but since as much as twenty-seven minutes may be missing from the Museum of Modern Art's print, we can't be certain what Vertov intended its final shape to be. What we have is a mixture of industrial images, the shouted slogans of shock brigades, and scenes from the countryside, though it is unclear what the last signify. There are shots of women dancing in a field, one of whom appears to be intoxicated, and of women loading hay into an antique-looking mechanical baler and then leaving with their forks and rakes. These scenes have a disconnected quality, as if they belonged to another film from a different time and place. Given what we know of conditions in the Ukraine at this time, they were probably taken elsewhere.

While *Enthusiasm* may have archival value as one of the first Soviet attempts to manipulate sound together with the other elements of the filmmaker's craft, it comes to us from a place and a time which raise in acute form Vertov's sensibility as a Soviet propagandist. For this was the very moment when Russia entered the darkest period of her modern history, and it was in the Ukraine that the most tragic consequences were felt of Stalin's new policies of rapid industrialization and enforced collectivization of farming.

In his book *The Harvest of Sorrow*, the historian Robert Conquest has documented the horrific course of this disaster. Writing of himself at the opening of his book, Conquest says his task "has often been so distressing that he has sometimes hardly felt able to proceed." He quotes Pasternak, who made a trip to the countryside hoping to write about the new life of the collective farms. "What I saw," wrote Pasternak in his

memoirs, "could not be expressed in words. There was such inhuman, unimaginable misery, such a terrible disaster, that it began to seem almost abstract, it would not fit within the bounds of consciousness. I fell ill. For an entire year I could not write." Conquest calculates that some fourteen million people died during the period 1929-33, as terror-famine struck the Ukraine in a deliberate move by Stalin to crush the Ukrainian national spirit and bend the Ukrainian people to the will of the Party in Moscow. Thus the Ukraine became during this period one vast Auschwitz.

It is inconceivable that Vertov was unaware of this tragedy as it began to unfold around him during his work for the Ukraine film studio. It's not impossible that he was originally transferred to the Ukraine because the central Party leadership needed a reliable stalwart from Moscow in place there, one who would not succumb to local Ukrainian sympathies. We have to imagine him with his cameras and primitive sound gear turning his back on the thousands dying of starvation in the villages and the terror and brutalization of those who survived. We have to imagine, standing in the shadows out of the range of his cameras, the army of secret police and Party cadres who enforced collectivization, sending thousands more to the Gulag and the execution yards of the GPU (KGB). Instead Vertov mouths the slogans of the regime, he gives us brass bands and talks of shock brigades and fulfilling quotas. *Enthusiasm* is a truly Orwellian film. It is the cinematic counterpart to the official double-talk that described the genocide by famine as "consumer asceticism."

Most film texts that champion Vertov make no reference to the Ukrainian tragedy, nor do they provide clues to the political context in which *Enthusiasm* was commissioned. As with *Kinopravda's* treatment of the Social Revolutionaries, however, Vertov was following closely the Party line handed down by the central leadership, now in effect Stalin. In 1928 a new series of rigged trials began, "wreckers' trials," aimed at intimidating managers and workers alike. Do Vertov's

synchronous speeches hint at threats that others may not be doing their Soviet duty in getting the coal out from the Don Basin to relieve shortages elsewhere? In April and May 1929, laws were passed inaugurating a new offensive against the Church. Vertov obliges by his opening segment encouraging the destruction of churches and their conversion to workers' clubs.

In *Enthusiasm* there are some remarkable moments when industrial sounds and pictures come together, but to discuss the film in terms of aesthetics, as most study programs do, is to miss its point. The Museum of Modern Art introduces it as a "film about the Don Basin," but of course it is not "about" the significant reality of what was going on in the Ukraine, where the Don Basin is situated, at that time. The film is not "about" anything connected with the actual world of terror-famine, forced labor, and industrial chaos. The Museum of Modern Art's silence on this matter endorses the film's disinformation message.

The myth

Vertov's reputation has benefited from an intellectual consensus that in the 1920s the Soviet Union was a place of artistic experimentation in film. It has become the accepted lore of film studies that Soviet film directors of this period, Eisenstein in particular, invented editing techniques that are now standard film practice. This is a subject for another inquiry. Relevant to the question of Vertov, however, is the manner in which Eisenstein's contemporaries in the West treated his films as documentaries.

It must now be said that to describe Vertov as a pioneer of documentary reporting, as Erik Barnouw does in *Documentary*, his influential survey of "the non-fiction film," is grotesque. It is turning the meaning of words inside out, like Soviet newspeak. Barnouw, otherwise a reliable guide, has here fallen victim to artistic disinformation, taking such Vertov texts as he has come across at their face value, while ignoring the

political circumstances in which Vertov operated.

It would be more to the point to argue that in almost every respect European and American film practices were the formative influences on Soviet directors, Vertov included. His cinematic tricks were certainly anticipated by Georges Méliès, the French producer of film fantasies, active before 1914, and by Ferdinand Zecca, the director of the enormously popular Pathé films that dominated the world market in the same period. We can imagine Eisenstein and Vertov as teenagers being entranced by the magic of film illusionism long before they thought of making their own careers in the medium.

The truth is that there is no evidence that Vertov had any influence over the documentary idea, either in the Soviet Union or elsewhere. When Georges Sadoul, the Marxist film critic, declared that Vertov's international reputation was "immense" and that the British especially were "profoundly influenced" by him, we may detect one source of those false statements that have gone into the making of the Vertov myth. Enough examples have been given of the distortions in the Museum of Modern Art's approach to Vertov to suggest a similar influence at work in this otherwise excellent institution. Even films that directly followed Soviet propaganda requirements, like Ivens's *The Spanish Earth* (1937), show no aesthetic affinity to Vertov's films. Ivens, indeed, did not subscribe to Vertov's ideas. If Vertov can claim to be an innovator, it is in one respect only: his use of what purport to be actuality or factual shots to make deliberately fraudulent statements.

This being the case, it needs saying that Vertov's place is clearly with those other fabricators of cinematic lies, the Nazis. It is in this context, and this only, that his work merits attention. Inhabitants of the same moral universe, Nazi and Soviet propagandists had a great deal in common. Vertov's idea of a political newsreel, which he contrasted with the commercial newsreels of Pathé and Gaumont ("newspaper chroni-

cles”), were actually fulfilled in the Nazi newsreel of the late 1930s, which reversed the order of items from normal commercial practice and built instead from lightweight lead items to a politically significant climax at the end. Sound, of course, helped the Nazi method, but the same totalitarian mentality lay behind Vertov’s thinking. Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, it can hardly be denied, was a more accomplished product than *Three Songs of Lenin*, but the two films are remarkably similar in their glorification of the leader and of power represented by the leader, the *führer* principle. And this similarity is not just manifest in the subject matter of the films, it lay behind the almost mystical faith each filmmaker had in the leader’s vision for the medium of film itself. In both films the leader was given a mythological presence, more striking in the case of Hitler because the visual material was stronger.

In this respect, discussing Vertov’s aesthetics without mentioning the Gulag Archipelago is like dwelling on the architectural features of Nazi gas chambers without saying what they were used for. In 1934, when the Riefenstahl and Vertov films appeared, the worst crimes of the Nazis lay in the future, beyond the imagination of Western Europeans and Americans; those of Lenin and Stalin, however, had already been committed, although concealed behind the smoke screen of false words, false news, false films. Vertov’s celebration of Stalin’s “Plan” in *Enthusiasm* should thus more accurately be compared with the Nazi wartime film *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*, made at the bogus Theresienstadt camp to fool the Red Cross and neutrals. It’s as if, in the shadow of the barbed wire and crematoria of Auschwitz, Vertov were to extol the virtues of the SS, praising their love of dogs, their fondness for Beethoven, their smart uniforms. And indeed, in Western film journals there are those who can write of Vertov’s film, as one Lucy Fischer did in *Film Quarterly* a few years ago: “It is an ode to the cooperative enthusiasm of Soviet workers.”

The radical legacy

As a result of the Second World War, the fate of Nazi and Soviet films has suffered a strange reversal, reminding us of the saying that history is the propaganda of the victor. Nazi films, in their day a great propaganda success, are now viewed with critical detachment. Considered in their historical context, they greatly add to our understanding of the period in which they were made as well as of the psychology of mass persuasion. But Vertov’s films, insignificant and indeed barely visible in their day, have emerged as a vehicle for a renewed assault on Western values. It is to this aspect of Vertov’s case that we must finally turn.

References to Vertov are now embedded in nearly all modern textbooks and film study programs, most of them following the false evaluation of him that we have been discussing. Much of this attention can be attributed to a kind of film snobbery coupled with ignorance; it is so much easier to repeat what is said by others than to have to make one’s own judgments, and what is said by others, particularly when it includes the word “avant-garde,” has a kind of insider appeal. The inaccessibility of much of the original material aids this process.

No great harm would come from this if it were simply a debate on aesthetic theory. It goes without saying that people differ in their emotional response to an audio-visual experience like a film, and academic theorists will differ in their judgments on the films we have been discussing—and these films, it needs repeating, never claimed attention as popular entertainment.

But this is not simply a debate on aesthetic theory. For we find that today’s interest in Vertov also stems from a political agenda held by a new generation of men and women whose sights are set on the mass media with purposes rather similar to Vertov’s. Since Vertov’s rhetoric was largely fraudulent, since his probity was questionable, this use of his name for political purposes must be challenged.

Typical of the approach of this new

generation of political activists is a collection of essays published in 1984 under the title *Show Us Life*, a phrase of Vertov's, edited by a Thomas Waugh, "professor of film studies at Concordia University, Montreal."² In his introduction Waugh refers to a meeting in 1979 of "more than 500 radical media activists from the U.S. and Canada" at which more than eighty-five films were shown, seventy of them described as documentaries. Evidently the meeting led to the publication of the essays five years later.

Of the twenty-six contributors to this volume, thirteen appear to be connected with academic institutions, another two are listed as "teacher and activist," and the remainder are involved in one way or another with the media. There is no way of knowing what is the present number of adherents to the program outlined in *Show Us Life*, but from the emphasis on the teaching of film revealed in this case it's reasonable to assume there are like-minded people to be found in teaching outlets across the country, especially where course offerings isolate film theory and criticism from political history.

In addition to infiltrating academic and media institutions, the activists' program is designed for a ragbag army of malcontents, itemized by Waugh as follows:

"poor" and marginal film-makers/users, both those working within the framework of the traditional left and workers' movements, and those within the progressive mass movements of the seventies and eighties: the women's movement; minority, anti-racist and national movements; the environmental/anti-nuke/peace movement; lesbian and gay liberation groups; and other resistance movements enlisting prisoners, consumers, welfare recipients, immigrants, the handicapped, the elderly, the unemployed, and others on down the endless list of those disenfranchised under patriarchal capitalism.

For all these groups, Vertov is invoked as "the founding parent of radical documen-

tary." Among his latter-day followers we find the same kind of doubletalk as he used for his "political newsreel" with its "communist decoding of the world." While we are given no clear exposition of what is meant by "radical documentary," the phrase itself and others like it ("documentary activism," "committed documentarists," "film activism") alert us to the false consciousness behind the movement. The commitment is not to documentary integrity, or to an aesthetic ideal, but to an ideology, the "goal of radical socio-political transformation." In its contempt for popular culture and media institutions this language, often flavored with the latest semiotic jargon, closely resembles Vertov's position.

What our study of Vertov, then, reveals is that both in theory and in practice, in the writing of film history and film criticism, in the instruction given to film students, a subversive political agenda may often lie behind the honor accorded to the name of Dziga Vertov. For the Soviets, promoting Vertov's reputation as an original and creative documentary filmmaker has turned out to be more effective in terms of artistic disinformation than were his films in his lifetime as propaganda. In the period between the two world wars, Soviet films found their most appreciative audiences in Western film societies, which Communists and fellow travellers took an active role in founding and then using for propaganda purposes. Today, it would appear that Vertov's followers see a similar opportunity existing in the film classes burgeoning in the West's academic environment. But just as the workers' film clubs of the 1930s collapsed when Comintern funds and support were withdrawn following the contortions of Stalin's foreign policy, so it is likely that the credit rating of early Soviet film propagandists will likewise plunge as the Soviets are themselves driven to tell the truth about Lenin and the Bolshevik coup d'état of 1917. In the meantime, it behooves college faculties and the general editors of textbooks to take another look at what is being sanctioned in this field in the name of higher education.

2 *Show Us Life* was published by The Scarecrow Press.

Graham Greene: the politics

by Bruce Bawer

Politics have always figured conspicuously in Graham Greene's fiction. The concerns of his Thirties novels—*It's a Battlefield*, *England Made Me*, *Brighton Rock*—are largely political; even his so-called entertainments, as we have seen,¹ have pronounced political ingredients: *Stamboul Train* involves a Yugoslav insurrectionist, *The Confidential Agent* a continental civil war. Of all Greene's novels, however, the ones that probably come to mind most readily when the word *politics* is mentioned—or, at least, those in which his political notions find their most memorable expression—are *The Quiet American*, *The Comedians*, *The Honorary Consul*, and *The Human Factor*. If in Greene's political novels of the Thirties his principal object of ridicule is Great Britain, in these later novels—which appeared between 1955 and 1978—the repellent figure in the carpet is consistently the United States; while the protagonists are invariably competent, seasoned Britishers (or at least half-Brits) who know how complex and morally equivocal realpolitik can be, the forces of evil tend to be either credulous, sanctimonious Yanks (who, fools that they are, take words like *democracy* and *individuality* seriously) or their fascist lackeys.

These novels can, then, be shrill, and many a character overdetermined; what's good about them, however, is that they generally

have the virtues of top-notch thrillers: superb pacing, picturesque minor characters, fine local color (not overdone, as in many of Greene's earlier books), and a convincing air of danger. In each of them, an apathetic but basically good man finds himself drawn by friendship or love into a dangerous, politically charged situation; invariably, the results are disastrous, and are meant to illustrate the tragic necessity of commitment. Catholicism—which is thematically central to such novels as *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*—does not disappear from the scene, to be sure, but the struggles with faith that take place are depicted in broader, more secular terms; some of the concepts, moreover, that Greene might previously have represented in spiritual terms take on, in these novels, a more distinctly political coloring.

Take *The Quiet American* (1955), for example. Whereas in *A Burnt-Out Case* Greene chooses to embody innocence in the young and impercipient priest Father Thomas, in this novel innocence is personified by an American who, on the surface, seems to be the very incarnation of his native virtues. The book's setting is Saigon, and its protagonist-cum-narrator is Thomas Fowler, a world-weary, middle-aged English reporter who knows all the angles and whose credo is not to get involved; the man who finally gets him involved is the newly arrived U.S. economic envoy Alden Pyle, a young Harvard graduate, devout Christian, and

¹ The first two parts of this essay appeared in the September and October issues of *The New Criterion*.

probable virgin who befriends Fowler, and who is “determined . . . to do good, not to any individual person, but to a country, a continent, a world.” He is also determined—in the most honorable fashion—to win the hand of Fowler’s teenaged Vietnamese mistress, Phuong, whom Fowler cannot marry because his Catholic wife in England won’t give him a divorce. But Pyle’s very innocence makes him a sucker for evil, causing him to sponsor the murderous General Thé, for whom he holds a misguided hope as a so-called “Third Force” solution to the current French-Vietnamese standoff; it is after one of Thé’s bombs kills a number of women and children that Fowler rouses himself to action—and inadvertently brings about Pyle’s demise.

Greene’s command of cultural and atmospheric detail is particularly impressive here: Fowler discourses self-assuredly on the effects of opium, makes apparent sense of the confusion of mid-Fifties Indochinese politics, and brings to life the “Low Country landscape where young green rice shoots and golden harvests take the place of tulips.” Fowler’s authoritativeness in regard to all things Annamese is important to the book, for it lends his strong opinions about the Vietnam situation an air of validity. It also encourages us—for a while, anyway—to see Americans the way he does: as “big, noisy, boyish and middle-aged” oafs who swill Coca-Cola and drive big cars, who have taken degrees in “those subjects Americans can take degrees in,” and who inhabit “a psychological world of great simplicity.” Like his countrymen, Pyle’s only crime is his credulity; he has no business in Vietnam, Fowler insists, and should be “reading the Sunday supplements at home and following the baseball . . . safe with a standardized American girl who subscribed to a book club.”

It’s all quite clever. But a little America-bashing goes a long way, and eventually it’s hard not to see Greene’s prejudices—for these are clearly not just Fowler’s opinions but his author’s—as the puerile manifestation of a certain type of Englishman’s

irrational postwar resentment. The subtext of all these anti-American digs, in short, is that it’s not an English world anymore but an American one. “We used to speak of sterling qualities,” Fowler says. “Have we got to talk now of a dollar love?” And he notes sardonically that at the American Legation, “[e]ven their lavatories were air-conditioned, and presently the temperature tempered air dried my tears as it dries the spit in your mouth and the seed in your body.” What more revealing symbol could there be for Britain’s emasculation by America?

Here, as in all of his later political novels, a fundamental part of Greene’s hard-bitten-realist pose is a scornful attitude toward what he calls “isms” and “ocracies,” which he contrasts unfavorably with “facts.” “As for liberty,” Fowler says, “I don’t know what it means.” Ditto for individuality. Only someone as naïve as an American, he implies, would take such concepts seriously. Needless to say, for a writer as individualistic as Greene—and as dependent as he is on Western freedoms—to assign such sentiments to a character who plainly speaks for him in such matters is unadulterated hypocrisy. And the character himself, meanwhile, represents the sheerest sort of self-flattery: while Pyle is at times almost inconceivably ingenuous, Fowler is just a bit too savvy to be believed, his eleventh-hour resolution a little too formulaic, his quips in the face of death a shade too reminiscent of a Bogart movie hero’s.

Much the same is true of Brown, the British, Monaco-born, Jesuit-educated hotel owner who is the narrator and hero of *The Comedians* (1966). The setting is Haiti, which under the dictator “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his “bogey-men,” the vicious Tontons Macoute, has become a police state. Like Fowler, Brown is an apathetic foreigner who knows this chaotic place inside out, but who—because of the subversive actions of a sleazy profiteer named Jones, who may or may not be American—ends up getting involved anyway. As in the case of Fowler, Brown’s initial insistence that he had long

ago “lost completely the capacity to be concerned” feels more like a thriller device than a genuine character trait; the same holds for his repeatedly proclaimed perception of those around him as “comedians”—as people who escape commitment, that is, by various forms of sentimentality and pretense.

The book is revealing—to put it mildly—for the parallels Greene draws between Catholicism and Communism. Brown claims not to be a Communist, but when his German mistress tells him he speaks like one, he says, “Sometimes I wish I were,” and declares his envy for the Communism of his friend Dr. Magiot: “He’s lucky to believe. I left all such absolutes behind me in the chapel of the Visitation.” The novel concludes with Dr. Magiot’s astonishing, anti-rational apologia for Communism which, he says,

is more than Marxism, just as Catholicism . . . is more than the Roman Curia. There is a *mystique* as well as a *politique*. We are humanists, you and I. Catholics and Communists have committed great crimes, but at least they have not stood aside, like an established society, and been indifferent. I would rather have blood on my hands than water like Pilate . . . If you have abandoned one faith, do not abandon all faith. There is always an alternative to the faith we lose. Or is it the same faith under another mask?

We are plainly expected to read this paean without irony, to see it as wise and noble and heartfelt. Not only is this speech extremely ineffective in dramatic terms, however—its sentiments don’t follow at all from the novel’s story—but it would seem to confirm that Greene’s leftist politics are no more a product of rational, responsible thought than is his peculiarly constituted Catholicism; as with Catholicism, it is largely the *mystique* of Communism that appeals to him. Notwithstanding his much-vaunted disapproval of sentimentality and pretense, Greene’s fondness for the false gods of Communism (and it matters little,

really, whether he calls himself a Communist or not) certainly seems the height of self-deceiving sentimentality.

The Thomas Hardy epigraph to *The Honorary Consul* (1973) would appear, by its placement in such a context, to reiterate Dr. Magiot’s parallel between Catholicism and Communism: “All things merge in one another—good into evil, generosity into justice, religion into politics.” The dictatorship of choice this time around is Paraguay, the homeland of half-English physician Eduardo Plarr, who has lived since boyhood in an Argentinian border city and whose father—a well-known “idealist”—may or may not still be alive in a Paraguayan jail. It is on the off chance of helping to free his father that the aloof, apolitical Plarr lends a hand to Leon Rivas, a revolutionary ex-priest who seeks to gain the release of Paraguayan political prisoners by taking the British ambassador hostage. But someone blunders, and Rivas ends up in possession of Plarr’s small-fry friend Charley Fortnum, who holds the empty title of British honorary consul, and about whom the London government could not care less. It is, Plarr feels, up to him to try to set things right.

Here again, the suspense is nicely managed, but the ideas that propel it are ludicrous. For one thing, with his distinctly early-Seventies take on Greenian isolato-talk (“I know how to fuck—I don’t know how to love”), Plarr sometimes sounds as if he’d be more at home in Marin County than in South America. And though the book was very well received at the time, one wonders how its sympathetic view of terrorist hostage-taking (“Perhaps it was love of a kind,” Fortnum says afterward of his kidnapping by Rivas) would go over in the wake of the past decade’s hostage crises in Iran and Lebanon. As in the cases of Fowler and Brown, moreover, Plarr’s estrangement from his fellow man is presented from the beginning as a *fait accompli*, his background filled in like a laundry list. One doesn’t believe deeply in—or, for that matter, feel deeply about—such a character’s initial detachment,

because one isn't shown how he came to be this way. And one senses that it simply wouldn't occur to Greene that such detachment has to be accounted for in dramatic terms, because this attitude toward life comes altogether too easily to him.

If *The Human Factor* (1978) is the most successful of Greene's later novels in terms of evading this problem, it is partly because its protagonist, the thirty-year British Foreign Office veteran Maurice Castle, faces a somewhat different emotional predicament than Fowler, Brown, and Plarr: instead of being pulled from an unconvincing political aloofness into a facile political engagement, he finds himself positioned between two strongly conflicting loyalties. One of them is to his beautiful Bantu wife, Sarah (notice how the names match those in Greene's 1951 novel *The End of the Affair*), whom he met several years ago while stationed in Pretoria; the other is to his superiors, who regard him as highly reliable ("[d]ullish man . . . it's generally the brilliant and ambitious who are dangerous"). As we eventually discover, however, these two loyalties are in secret conflict: for several years now, Castle has been covertly supplying confidential information to the Communist agent who helped Sarah escape from South Africa. And just when he feels he should close up shop—for his higher-ups are beginning to suspect him—something comes along that he simply *has* to share with the enemy: a joint U.S.-British-South African operation called Uncle Remus, whose purpose is to perpetuate apartheid through the deployment (by South Africa) of atomic weapons. Castle's only hope of thwarting the implementation of this sinister plan is to leak word to his Communist contact—whatever the risk to his own life.

Greene's plot has holes in it. One need not be a Pollyanna to have trouble buying the premise that the U.S. and Britain would concoct something quite as extreme as Uncle Remus (or, for that matter, that they'd come up with that name for it). This is a significant flaw, for the book doesn't work unless one sympathizes, to some extent, with

Castle's treachery, and that sympathy depends largely upon one's ability to believe in the existence of Uncle Remus. Equally hard to buy is the rubout of Castle's partner, Davis, whom their superiors suspect of being the leak. Would the British Secret Service, one finds oneself wondering, really liquidate one of its own so quickly, and on so little evidence? And would their suspicions—under circumstances such as those detailed in the book—rest on Davis (whose only crime would seem to be his youth and negligence) and not on Castle, whose indebtedness to a Communist agent for his wife's safety is well known to them?

These problems alone do not necessarily cripple the book's effectiveness. But perhaps just as disabling to its credibility is the venomous attitude that Greene expresses toward America and everything it represents. Snide remarks about the United States are assigned to a number of characters, including Castle, who observes of the patrons of a pornographic bookstore that "they are not clean young Americans doing their duty like the napalm bombers [in Vietnam] were." Plausible though they may otherwise be, the characters come across only as authorial mouthpieces when they say this sort of thing. What's more, they refer to democracy only in sarcastic or dismissive terms, or else ignore its existence altogether, as does one of Castle's superiors when he remarks that "[t]hirty years ago when I was a student I rather fancied myself as a kind of Communist. Now . . . ? Who is the traitor—me or Davis? I really believed in internationalism, and now I'm fighting an underground war for nationalism." Finally, Greene makes irresponsible use of the fiction of Uncle Remus—which, of course, proves to be not an M.I.6 but a CIA brainchild—to score political points about the real world; Castle, for instance, says that the Soviet Union's "worst crimes are always in the past, and the future hasn't arrived yet. I can't go on parroting, 'Remember Prague! Remember Budapest!'—they were years ago. One has to be concerned about the present, and the present is Uncle Remus."

The unfortunate thing about all these failings is that *The Human Factor* is really a first-class thriller—its characters sharply drawn, its plot elegantly structured, its style crisp and serviceable. If one can allow oneself to accept, for dramatic purposes and for the duration of the novel, Greene's picture of the global situation, it makes for a very entertaining read. For a book that seeks to be regarded not just as a thriller, however, but as a serious novel, his warped representation of reality constitutes a major weakness. Greene has confessed that *The Human Factor* was "inspired" by his friend, the famous traitor Kim Philby, whom he has lauded for "the consistency with which he came to his new [Communist] convictions and defended them in the struggle against fascism"; the same deluded world view that informs this outlandish remark is at the heart of *The Human Factor*.

After the publication of *The Human Factor*, Greene reportedly thought that he had written his last novel. And in a sense he had. The books that followed are odd, cryptic, rather underwhelming little fables: episodic and meandering, they are weak on plot and character, with a wispy, almost ultramundane tone not unlike that of Shakespeare's romances. Though they explore many of the same themes as his earlier novels, they do so in a manner at once dimmer and more indiscreet; with each book, the chapters get shorter and the margins wider. Each is essentially a character portrait of an eccentric—and either deific or diabolic—authority figure: a doctor, a monsignor, a captain. *Dr. Fischer of Geneva, or The Bomb Party* (1980) recounts the cruel and unusual behavior of the narrator's proud, evil millionaire father-in-law, Dr. Fischer (we know Dr. Fischer is evil because he finds theology "an amusing intellectual game"); *Monsignor Quixote* (1982), the tale of a modern-day village priest who travels across Spain with his Communist friend Sancho Zancas, apparently seeks to embody a sort of symbolic alliance of Communism and Catholicism.

As for Greene's most recent novel, *The*

Captain and the Enemy (1988), its premise bears an interesting resemblance to that of his first. Like Andrews (the young protagonist of *The Man Within*), Victor (later Jim) Baxter is adopted by a charismatic, widely travelled friend of his father's who takes him away forever from his stern public school. This happens, however, not because he has been orphaned (as is the case with Andrews, who goes on to become an apprentice smuggler on the Sussex coast), but because his father has lost him in a game—maybe backgammon, maybe chess—to a mysterious gun-runner known as the Captain. After all this has transpired, alas, the tale grows slack and flat-footed, ultimately wandering into polemical territory with a slim, improbable story line involving the Panama Canal Treaty, the Somoza regime, and Salvadoran death squads. The novel reads like the feverish dream of an old man possessed by an unreasoned hatred for the United States—a nation that is transformed, in this book, into a veritable symbol of supreme, unexceptioned evil—and by a mindless fascination with Latin American revolutionaries. If *The Man Within*, then, offers an uncommonly revealing glimpse into the Freudian preoccupations of a very young and ingenuous author, *The Captain and the Enemy* provides an equally candid insight into the sociopolitical obsessions of the same novelist sixty-odd years later—a man far older but, alas, not much wiser. In more than one way, then, *The Captain and the Enemy* brings Greene full circle.

All of which leaves us with one question: how did Graham Greene—an author who, as we have seen, has never quite shaken off the devices of a thriller writer—ever manage to acquire and maintain an international reputation as one of the most distinguished literary figures of his time? Undoubtedly this reputation owes much to the conspicuous role that Catholicism and leftist politics have played in Greene's most widely admired books. Certainly if he had spent his entire career writing straightforward thrillers

along the lines of *Stamboul Train* and *The Confidential Agent*, Greene would have remained at most a peripheral figure on the literary scene; for, in those precincts where literary performances are evaluated and authorial ranks assigned, it is widely understood (if not universally accepted) that a thriller, however accomplished, represents an achievement of a different kind than a serious literary novel. But something odd happens, in a certain sort of critical mind, when religion or politics enters the picture. Religion is serious; politics are serious. For many critics, therefore, a novelist who purports to address religious or political questions is a novelist to be taken seriously—no matter how unserious the manner in which he engages those topics, and no matter how strongly the impact of his fiction may prove to depend upon the modalities of melodrama and the stylistic mannerisms of the thriller.

During the last twenty-five years or so, moreover—the period during which three of Greene's four later political novels were published—a conspicuous attraction to radical-left politics has become one way for a writer to ensure not only that he will be taken seriously but that he will be looked upon favorably by a number of influential literary critics; for to many such critics, as we know, the aesthetic value of a work of fiction is of less importance than its politics. And surely nothing could have been more appealing to leftist intellectuals from China to Peru during this period than the sort of anti-Americanism that figures in Greene's later political novels. Even less radically inclined commentators have often felt honor-bound, it would seem, to congratulate the outspoken, left-leaning Greene for his supposed courage and political commitment.

Yet how could any intelligent reader who considers himself socially responsible smile on the notion of political commitment that is typically reflected in Greene's later novels? And how, for that matter, could any devout and thoughtful Catholic not be made uncomfortable by Greene's singular view of

Catholicism? For his Catholic novels and his later political novels make it clear that Greene looks upon both religion and politics, to a remarkable degree, not as means by which one may commit oneself to specific understandings of reality but as means of identifying oneself with certain ideals—ideals which one may well frankly accept as fanciful, illusory, and contrary to logic. Far from constituting rational, intellectual responses to the world, in other words, Greene's religion and politics more often seem attractive to him precisely because he regards them as forms of rebellion *against* intellect and reason, as ways of escape *from* the world. (Indeed, Norman Sherry, in his new biography of the author, quotes a sister-in-law of Greene's as saying that he "was not a logical man . . . He was not logical about politics, he was not logical about his religion.") Time and again, Greene approves of characters who pointedly dissociate their belief—whether religious or political—from reality. He patently wants us to admire Sarah, for instance, when she remarks in *The End of the Affair* that "[t]hey could dig up records that proved Christ had been invented by Pilate to get himself promoted and I'd believe just the same." (Here and in Greene's other Catholic novels, he makes it clear that the important thing is not to believe in God, in any conventional sense, but to love God—to cherish, that is, an idea of God.) Likewise, though Communism may have had disastrous consequences in the real world, Greene wants us to cheer Dr. Magiot's loyalty to it as a romantic dream—his loyalty to, in Magiot's phrase, Communism's "*mystique*." (As Carlyon observes wistfully in *The Man Within*, "A dream is often all there is to a man.")

To many a reader, it may seem that Magiot's continued faith in the mystique of Communism prevents him from becoming responsibly involved in the real world; to Greene, however, this *is* involvement. In Greene's paradoxical view, that is to say, mystique *is* realpolitik, and it is altogether proper to respond to real-world problems by

dedicating oneself to an alluring absolute. Never mind that Communism has had far bloodier consequences than Western democracy: the important thing is not that democracy has done better by humanity, but that Communism has greater charisma. One of the unintended ironies of Greene's oeuvre is that, whereas he implicitly criticizes the innocence of many of his characters—among them Father Thomas in *A Burnt-Out Case* and Alden Pyle in *The Quiet American*—because it leads them to unwise judgments or disastrous associations, Greene's own broad experience of the world has patently not prevented him from making choices and forging alliances that are at least as ill-advised and calamitous.

Highly enlightening in this regard is *Getting to Know the General*, Greene's 1984 memoir of his friendship with the Marxist dictator of Panama, General Omar Torrijos Herrera, who had died three years earlier. Torrijos had first invited Greene to Panama in 1976, and over the succeeding years acted as his host during several visits (which seem to have provided the background for some of the later episodes in *The Captain and the Enemy*). Subtitled *The Story of an Involvement*, the memoir is an incredible document, an unintentionally devastating self-portrait in irresponsibility, egotism, and fatuity. It is also a portrait of General Torrijos, and no press agent ever wrote a more flattering one. For Greene—who was himself plainly flattered by the dictator's attentions—judges Torrijos not by his accomplishments but by his professed dreams, his utterly impracticable “plans” for everything from the elimination of slums to the construction of “a pleasure park for the poor.” Another factor in Greene's admiration is that Torrijos proved to be a man after Greene's own heart, a man who loathed America, whose “romanticism was balanced by a streak of cynical wisdom” (this is clearly also Greene's view of himself), who was “not the kind of man to be sexually faithful to one woman” but who was “faithful above all to friendship.” It means a lot to Greene when Torrijos tells him, “You and I are both self-

destructive.” Greene's comment: “It was like a friend speaking who knew me better than I knew myself.”

Manifestly, *friend* and *friendship* are the key words here. There can be little question but that Torrijos's feelings of amity for him outweigh, in Greene's mind, the general's tyranny and thuggery. So it is that, in praising the Torrijos government early in the book, Greene manages to avoid mentioning that the general had imposed a ban on opposition political parties. (He finally mentions the ban much later on, when Torrijos lifts it—an act to which Greene can refer approvingly.) And so it is, too, that when Torrijos offers to send a hit man to France to rub out an enemy of Greene's, the author looks upon the proposal not as further evidence that Torrijos is a thug, but as a delightful confirmation of the general's friendship: imagine, the man likes him so much that he would have somebody killed for him! “I have never lost as good a friend as Omar Torrijos,” Greene writes sincerely, apropos of Torrijos's offer—and from a man who has barely advanced beyond schoolyard values, this is supreme praise. Not surprisingly, Greene reserves his calumny in these pages almost exclusively for *norteamericanos*, waxing derisive, at one point, about the comfortable living conditions of Americans in Panama—conditions which, one suspects, hardly compare to the luxury that Greene enjoys in Antibes. (And this derision comes, moreover, from a man who, elsewhere in the book, without a trace of irony, complains about the lack of cheese on the Concorde on the way home!)

The fact that emerges conclusively from both his novels and memoirs is that Greene doesn't understand the meaning of the term social involvement. By all indications, the sometime public-school boy who avoided his fellows for fear of contamination by the evil of sex has remained detached, incapable of a truly selfless allegiance, a rationally founded devotion. In his view, it would seem, only love or pity or enthrallment by some kind of *mystique* is capable of drawing one into a commitment to either God or

man. And such commitment is by its nature self-destructive, he believes, because it brings one into intimacy with “the odour of human meanness and injustice” (to quote Greene in *The Heart of the Matter*), and because (as Scobie reflects) “no human being can really understand another.” As Joseph Conrad writes in a passage that Greene borrowed for the epigraph to *The Human Factor*, “I only know that he who forms a tie is lost. The germ of corruption has entered into his soul.” The intended irony at the heart of Greene’s fiction is that ideals—which are sublime at least in part because they exist forever apart from physical reality, incapable of being translated to it, realized in it, or corrupted by it—can cause a formerly aloof person to become embroiled in, and therefore corrupted by, the world around him.

Yet the cardinal failing of Greene’s most celebrated novels is that the ideals—religious and political—which play so dominant a role in them are too often bizarre, their sincere espousal by sane, sober, and well-educated twentieth-century individuals hard to imagine and even harder to countenance. If his entertainments are on the whole more effective than his Catholic novels, it is because in the former he routinely distances himself from his protagonists, while in the latter he saddles his protagonists with some variation on his

own perverse notion of faith; thus, as a rule, the heroes of the Catholic novels are motivated by ideas that the average intelligent reader—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, agnostic, or otherwise—cannot take seriously, and that are so thematically pivotal that it is likewise virtually impossible to take the books themselves seriously. And if Greene’s later political novels are (to varying degrees) successful as thrillers, they too are well-nigh irredeemably marred by the fatuous politics that figure importantly in their plots.

How, then, can Greene legitimately be called a great writer? Among other things, a great writer helps us to understand what it means—and why it is (or is not) worthwhile—to be human and to be alive. To examine Greene’s novels thoughtfully is to be confronted, in quite dramatic fashion, with the plain fact that his dedication to the ideas supposedly central to his own life is ultimately so cursory, so self-contentedly shallow, that he cannot possibly have anything of importance to convey to us about such matters. Greene has, to be sure, a facility for narrative, an eye for atmosphere, a gift for publicity, and (to borrow Noel Coward’s phrase) “a talent to amuse,” sometimes when he least intends to do so—but he is, most assuredly, far from being the literary master that countless people who have read little or none of his work suppose him to be.

Editor’s note: We wish to call attention to the publication of Peter Davison’s new collection of poems, *The Great Ledge* (Knopf, \$18.95; \$9.95 paper). Several poems included in this volume were originally published in *The New Criterion*.

The example of Robert Hayden

by William Rice

As a rule, today's poets are judged by such criteria as early recognition, inclusion in anthologies, conformity to prevailing practice and opinion, the proliferation of critical studies of their work, and the awarding of grants and prizes and professorships at universities—in short, by their connectedness to the insider network that now dominates American letters. Poets are also judged by their poetry, but this procedure is often little more than a reflexive exercise—a genuflection to old friends or politico-academic allies. And even when critical discussion is intelligent, it tends to promote a literary culture in which poetry suited to arcane criticism takes precedence over poetry that is clear and accessible. Under such circumstances, the private voice prevails over the public, poets rarely reach audiences beyond the academy, and opportunism may be rewarded over talent and integrity.

Measured by the standards that apply today, the career of the late Robert Hayden (1913-1980) is at best mixed. From the 1940s until near the end of his life, when his fortunes improved, he succeeded in getting his books of poetry published only by small presses with their traditionally limited audiences. Still, he was regularly included in anthologies. To name only two, he appeared in the Hughes-Bontemps *Poetry of the Negro*, published by Doubleday in 1950, and the pioneering *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* of 1973, edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair.

Hayden subsisted on academic appointments long before it was the norm for poets. He wrote in obscurity as he climbed the tenure ladder at Fisk University in Nashville. His academic life there was less than ideal, and the city's racially segregated schools cost him the daily companionship of his family when his wife took their daughter to New York City for proper education. He was briefly peripatetic in the 1960s; then, in 1969, when he was in his mid-fifties, he was offered a professorship at the University of Michigan, where he had been a student of W. H. Auden's and won the Hopwood Award in the early 1940s. At Michigan Hayden was treated well. He had only to endure the isolation imposed by literary scholars who considered English departments their private preserve and who viewed creative writers as an introduced species apt to multiply (as indeed they have). Near the end of his life, he was appointed for two terms (1976-77) as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress.

Robert Hayden's fortunes with literary critics were less auspicious. He is the subject of a more than competent study by Fred Fetrow in the uneven, formulaic Twayne series. After his death, three dozen memoirs, articles, and poems were collected in an issue of *Obsidian* which, unfortunately, was poorly copy-edited. A good full-length study by John Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, was soon released—but by an English publishing house; and a recent book by Pontheolla T.

Williams, published here, contains such wild and speculative readings of Hayden's poems as to be a dubious contribution at best.¹

It would be unfair to lay Hayden's ill luck with critics to his refusal to endorse the cultural program of his would-be allies in the literary world. Nevertheless, his name would probably be more familiar if he had not resisted the militant doctrines that were in the air in the 1960s, the pivotal years of his career. It was a time when artistic reputations were made on the cheap currency of politics. Hayden chose not to invest. He was no longer a young man then, of course, nor was he a stranger to deep and unpopular allegiances. He was a veteran of the black civil-rights movement from his youth in the 1930s; and in the 1940s he had joined the Bahá'í faith, a move unlikely to win him friends among radical intellectuals. As a writer he had early on stopped dabbling in fashionable protest poetry, and he gained a healthy, self-conscious distance from the Harlem Renaissance writers who gave him his first models. In his late twenties he could write sincere but ordinary lines like these:

You should live naked,
Naked and proud,
Where black skin is neither
God's curse, nor a shroud.

But as he matured—quickly—his thinking sought universals and his verse gained subtlety. Men and women of all ages and places were to be seen not for what separated them but for what they had in common. In this Hayden may reflect the Bahá'í belief in world unity, although the idea of a transcultural, continuous, and ennobling human tradition was widely endorsed at the

time. (Its status in our revisionist age is less certain, to say the least.)

All this is not to suggest that Hayden ever forgets the tragic history of his race. On the contrary, in the words of William Meredith, he penned "scarcely a line . . . which is not identifiable as an experience of black America." But there is also scarcely a line that is not a great deal more. Take, for example, the opening of the third part of "Middle Passage," a long collage-like poem on the Atlantic slave trade:

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,
the dark ships move, the dark ships move,
their bright ironical names
like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;
plough through thrashing glister toward
fata morgana's lucent melting shore,
weave toward New World littorals that are
mirage and myth and actual shore.

In these eight lines a particularly hideous aspect of slavery—that slave vessels were given names like "Amistad," "Esperanza," "Adventure," and "Mercy"—is universalized in the image of the sniggering killer. Likewise, the image of a shore shimmering in the distance fuses the mythic with the immediate. The passage of man from freedom into slavery is represented both as sensory trauma and real event. For Hayden, the crimes committed against his race by Europeans and Americans are to be understood not only as enduring historic wrongs but, more importantly, as evidence of the human race's enormous capacity for evil; and poets who wish to narrow the scope of this awesome subject risk becoming what he called "minotaurs of edict." Hayden held that in art the black experience of suffering and the white experience of moral culpability should serve to illuminate, for readers of all races, the complete *human* condition. Art, then, impels us toward unity and shared tradition. To preserve artistic integrity, Hayden held, the poet must remain "meditative, ironic/and richly human" and be content with "crafted confusion." Public poetry remains possible—Hayden wrote a number of

1 *Robert Hayden*, by Fred M. Fetrow (Twayne Publishers, 1984); *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review*, volume 8, number 1 (Spring 1981); *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden*, by John Hatcher (George Ronald, 1984); *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry*, by Pontheolla T. Williams (University of Illinois Press, 1987).

occasional poems for large audiences—but it could never become a political tool. If it did, it would descend to partisan propaganda.

Needless to say, when the 1960s exploded and the Black Power movement advanced the idea of a Black Aesthetic, Robert Hayden was damned up and down for his alleged naïveté. He was called an Uncle Tom for cautioning, in “A Ballad of Remembrance,” against the rage that radicals were urging on black citizens:

Hate, shrieked the gun-metal priestess
from her spiked bellcollar curved like a
fleur-de-lis:

As well have a talon as a finger, a muzzle
as a mouth,
as well have a hollow as a heart. And she
pinwheeled
away in coruscations of laughter, scattering
those others before her like foil stars.

Hayden’s dismissal of the program of separatist “Negro poetry” as “an ideological weapon” drew a bitter attack from Don L. Lee (later Haki Madhubuti): “Mr. Hayden,” he wrote in *Negro Digest*, “what are television, radio, movies . . . and weekly news magazines if not ideological weapons—white ideology?” Lee denounced Countee Cullen and Hayden for “perpetrat[ing] a very dangerous myth . . . that poets other than black poets or black critics, are qualified to judge black or ‘negro’ poetry.” On other occasions, the poet was denigrated by others for being an admirer of William Butler Yeats, for using difficult words, and for not using “black style and language.”

An affable, noncombative man by nature, Hayden proved fearless in the face of these assaults on his art and character. He spoke of “literary nazis,” of art being “displaced by argument,” and “racist propaganda in a new guise.” Once he echoed Oscar Wilde, stating that there is “no such thing as black literature. There’s good literature, and there’s bad. And that’s all!” Hayden’s courage

brought him considerable stress and anxiety.² Colleagues such as John W. Aldridge at Michigan remember him appearing in their offices, often very agitated. Would his adversaries never understand, he asked, that he was a poet first, that skin color was not to be exploited? Fortunately, he never let hostile attention slow his pursuit of craft.

The charge against Hayden alluded to above—that as a poet he owed something to Yeats—is at least accurate, even if there is no reason to regard this debt as a flaw. As already noted, Hayden was a student of Auden’s and read deeply in the Harlem Renaissance poets. These three influences instilled in him a high regard for traditional poetic form: for the well-turned iambic line, for the subtle alternation of poetic feet to draw attention to the two- and three-sidedness of his rhetoric and imagery. But as Hayden matured he came to favor, even more than Auden and Yeats had, the metrically imperfect line that sounded right, rather than the strict line with cumbersome syllabic additions. He wrote the poem “Middle Passage,” for example, in blank verse, then revised it with only passing regard for scansion. I for one regret that at the peak of his powers Hayden no longer observed exacting poetic form, which alone can give the reader the pleasure of watching the exceedingly difficult done effortlessly. But Hayden knew the lessons of English prosody well, as almost all his work shows.

It is also to be regretted, I think, that Hayden stunted on the pleasures of rhyme. This may be a result of his unyoking of the Harlem Renaissance influence, but whatever its cause we find in its place a love of musical words. Even more interesting for their sound are his neologisms. His poems are sprinkled with “gangle,” “upfling,” and “oldrose.” His usage is at times difficult, even quaint, as his unsophisticated critics complained, and his syntax can be fairly

2 Hatcher, pages 78-88. Quotations from Hayden’s poetry are from Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems*, edited by Frederick Glaysher (Liveright, 1985).

demanding, as in these lines, which describe Perseus's confrontation with Medusa:

Her sleeping head with its great gelid mass
of serpents torpidly astir
burned into the mirroring shield—
a scathing image dire
as hated truth the mind accepts at last
and festers on.

If passages like this are best re-read and studied, Hayden could also write speechlike and lyrical verse which easily moves from voice to voice and subject to subject. Of a housemaid in "The Islands," he writes

... She's full

of raucous anger. Nevertheless brings gifts of
scarlet hibiscus when she comes to clean,
white fragrant spider-lilies too sometimes.

The roofless walls, the tidy ruins
of a sugar mill. More than cane
was crushed. But I am tired today

of history, its patina'd cliches
of endless evil. Flame trees.
The intricate sheen of waters flowing into
sun.

I wake and see
the morning like a god
in peacock-flower mantle dancing

on opalescent waves—

These lines reveal how Robert Hayden commands subjects that are at once separate and complementary: daily life and human history, conversation and contemplation, the natural world and the imagery of myth, moral engagement and aesthetic sense. The representation of so wide a range of concerns in a single poem (and in an entire body of carefully crafted poetry) is no small feat in our

age, and Robert Hayden's achievement is all the more admirable for the courage he showed when circumstances required.

To a surprising degree, those circumstances are still with us. The militants of the 1960s gain little notice now in the culture at large, but in the academy a self-interested critic or poet may find it hard to resist the fashion that relates art and vision insistently to race, class, and gender, the Trinity of new literary studies. For example, a highly placed figure on the academic scene, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., declared early this year in *The New York Times Book Review* that "the [traditional] teaching of literature is . . . the teaching of an esthetic and political order, in which no person of color, no woman, was ever able to discover the reflection or representation of his or her cultural image or voice." Unfortunately, this kind of thinking leads the academic literary establishment to draw crude political caricatures, as when Gates attributes to unnamed persons "on the cultural right" the appalling claim "that black literature can have . . . no masterpieces." Even more disastrously, literature itself becomes, according to this line of thought, merely a subfield of sociology.

If the new academic fashion widens Robert Hayden's readership, it will be mainly for the wrong reason—the isolated fact of his skin color. Even so, a new audience would also observe his dedication to the transcendent ideals of independence and integrity, craft and character. Looking ahead, we can hope with some confidence that Robert Hayden's example will not be lost and that, as he wrote of Frederick Douglass,

... this Negro,
... exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this
man
shall be remembered.

Three poems *by C. H. Sisson*

Aller Moor

And now the distance seems to grow
Between myself and what I know:

It is from a strange land I speak
And a far stranger that I seek.

A heron rises under my nose
And into the flat distance goes.

The thoughts that follow her grow less
And vanish into emptiness.

But I am I and I stay here:
Who and where I am is not clear.

And if I spoke, as I must not,
World that encircles me, then what?

No-one could find me, no-one say
On what sad drove my journey lay;

From where to where, which makes the who,
Cannot be visible to you,

For I, here walking, can declare
What lies beyond this open air.

Beyond all touch the cities lie
In which so many gasp and die

And make the words which seem to run
From mouth to mouth, as once my own,

Yet what runs with them is no more
Than I well know has run before;

So I resign me to this space
Which neither knows a human face

Nor mine, and where no answer is.
If one should ask, the answer dies.

Address

You whom I never loved,
You I shall never touch
Live in my mind as if you proved
A thesis about other such.

Which is, that firm and tender flesh
Is medicine for an aging man,
As if one body could refresh
Another as it never can.

The crook of age, the spring of youth,
Are equally the work of time;
What is in common is the truth
That age is age and prime is prime

And that both quickly slip away
To other hours, then none at all:
Whatever words the ghosts may say
It is the bodies take the fall.

Pretence may entertain the old,
The young may answer with a lie,
But neither old nor young can hold
The same illusion till they die.

I look on you, you look on me;
For both, to speak no word is best.
I contemplate your lovely youth;
You cannot bear to think the rest.

The pattern

The days seem long now, and life is long
Although the years hurry away to death;
No-one can daunt time; the young and strong
Are weak before it draws their dying breath.

It races, and they race, and still they lose;
The beds they tumble in grow comfortless.
How could imagination ever choose,
Since out of more there comes always less?

The gangling bunch of nerves which reach the brain
From every corner of the fleshly kingdom
Collects the news of beauty, but the pain
Of memory will devour comfort's crumb.

What is remembered of the years at last
Is nothing but the folly of the wise,
Prudence too much, or too much folly past,
No calculation helps the man who dies.

What comes back is that every choice is wrong,
No action finished as it was conceived,
The body withered while the hope was strong;
No itch it suffered ever was relieved.

O mind, the frenzy of a fluttered nerve,
What did you see as you went on your way?
What do you see now? Nothing will serve
To mitigate the horror of that day

When all goes crumbling to its final end;
The end of ends was far before that time.
No purpose was achieved, nothing could lend
The colour of intention to the climb

From that first pulp which once within the womb
Lived as unknowing as the wisest man,
To reach that image-decorated room
Death wipes as clean as when he first began.

Yet the pulp rises like a loaf of bread,
The harbouring belly swells, and then ejects
A naked clown who falls upon his head;
His parents see, he does not see, his prospects.

The reason of the world is in those two,
The one that bore, the one that set the seed;
The child is what he must be, and what grew
Once in the dark, finds what it is to feed.

Before the eyes can focus, ears can hear;
A cloud of sound bursts on the sleeping brain:
Then forms take shape, hunger may come, or fear,
An ancient pattern growing once again.

Love flashes from the eyes that wear the paps;
The peace they give resembles gratitude.
What deceits on both sides! The love perhaps
Following the particle it must extrude,

The gratitude compelled by satisfaction
Unable to attribute its delight:
A blind cradle rocks, and the exaction
Returns the infant to his sacred night.

So from this darkness does this ignorant
Grow senselessly, a tree without a root,
Only his predecessors confident
These vague extensions are a hand or foot.

So words collect which have no meaning yet,
Like dross upon the brain in sucking-time;
Sights veer and cloud and are indefinite;
The child moves in the chaos of his prime.

Movement it is that brings definition,
The toe, the toy, the blow or else the fall.
Wisdom creeps in then like the Evil One
To advise how to bully and to call.

And so to play, and give to fantasy
Control of every monster in the way;
Mind like a platitude will always see
Itself victorious in the shining day.

And then to youth, certain and arrogant,
Or weak and frightened when it finds defeat,
Still groping with its stream of youthful cant
To find a proper use for hands and feet.

The feet which lead him to the proper prize,
The hands which seek for softness once again;
The conjugation mastered by the eyes
Inflecting what until it turns to when.

To climb upon the body that he chose,
Yet did not choose but willingly obeyed,
Those breasts, that belly, that imagined rose
Blooming under the bush which marks its glade.

The bed of love declares itself supreme,
Yet not the love but only the desire
Which finds its solace there, is the true dream
Throwing itself upon its funeral pyre,

That desire which must flicker and then blaze
So often in what seem long years ahead,
Twists itself into many shapes and plays
Far subtler games than any in a bed.

The conqueror is happy on his horse,
The politician revels in acclaim,
The petty thief approves his clever course:
The hope that drives their movements is the same.

Justification in the eyes of men:
The lies crowd round the winner and he laughs.
And when he fails, as he must fail? Ah, then
He lies to please himself, and laughs and laughs.

So the word grows upon a tree of nerves,
To deceive all who take it for the fruit.
What fruit is there? The dying body serves
At last to stultify it from the root.

It came first rather as a bird to perch,
Twittering perhaps upon an utmost twig:
The dying body leaves it in the lurch,
The structured growth solid and gaunt and big.

The twig has lost its sap, the word its meaning.
Can it fly after that? The flock that fell
Bird after bird from nowhere, and sat preening,
Rises no more, and has no news to tell.

A twitter here and there is taken up
By other birds, perched upon other trees:
Then silence: other mimics fill the cup
Of the surrounding world, and seek to please.

And other movements bustle and are lost,
Of other bodies moving as they must,
For no word suits them, and their hopes are crossed
As others were which now compose the dust.

If any came, it was the only Word
From the beginning and beyond the end:
It was made flesh—which you may think absurd—
And if it was not, no man has a friend.

New life from old records

by Samuel Lipman

Writing about the renowned contralto Marian Anderson in last month's issue of *The New Criterion*, I described how musical beauty can be communicated through the art of a single great singer, one who combined an extraordinarily beautiful voice and a touchingly restrained musical personality. It is my intention here to shift the focus from the singer to the music sung, and to discuss some examples of the fate of the greatest masterworks at the hands—or more precisely at the vocal cords—of artists in the present and the past.

As an example of the present, my text will be Jessye Norman's recent "Live From Lincoln Center" telecast on PBS, with Zubin Mehta conducting the New York Philharmonic, of the concluding "Liebestod" from Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Miss Norman, born in Georgia in 1945, is perhaps the reigning diva of the day. Now (one must assume) in the prime of her vocal estate, she is the toast of continental Europe, Great Britain, and the United States; her schedule is full, her fees are astronomical, and her press coverage is both copious and reverent. At the Metropolitan Opera last season she was granted the rare honor of what might be called a one-woman evening: twin productions of Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, in which she shared the stage with bass Samuel Ramey, and Arnold Schoenberg's monodrama *Erwartung*, in which she occupied the stage alone. She is also a much admired Straussian and Wagnerian, singing

the lead role in James Levine's Vienna Philharmonic recording of Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Sieglinde in the Metropolitan recording (also with Levine) of Wagner's *Die Walküre*.

Miss Norman's fame thus established, much interest attached to her singing on the General Motors-sponsored Philharmonic broadcast, a gala event opening the orchestra's 1989-90 season (the last but one of music director Zubin Mehta) in Avery Fisher Hall. Mr. Mehta began with a heavy-handed and plodding rendition of the Overture to Wagner's *Tannhäuser*; after the intermission, he led the orchestra in a loveless version of the much-played Mozart Symphony no. 40 in G minor, K.550. Miss Norman made her first appearance of the evening in the Five Rückert Songs of Gustav Mahler. This music, as always in Mahler's vocal writing, emphasizes the sound of the voice as a quasi-orchestral instrument rather than as a means for limning character and personality; Miss Norman met this challenge admirably.

It was different with the music from *Tristan und Isolde* that concluded the program. It must be admitted that matters were hardly helped along by Mr. Mehta's wayward yet rigid, distorted yet predictable performance of the Prelude to the opera that preceded the "Liebestod." So concerned was he with mooning over the impassioned aspects of the Prelude that vital ensemble was ragged, and composer-indicated

nuances, often calling for soft playing from the orchestra, were engulfed in a flood tide of what seemed, at least to me, vulgar and wearily constant self-expression.

Matters hardly improved when Miss Norman entered upon the "Liebestod," with its musical evocation of the magically rapt and supremely inward opening words:

Mild und leise wie er lächelt,/wie das Auge
hold er öffnet—/seht ihr's, Freunde? seht ihr's
nicht?/Immer lichter wie er leuchtet,/stern-
umstrahlet hoch sich hebt?

(Softly and gently he smiles,/how sweetly he
opens his eyes—/do you see him, friends?
don't you see him?/Always brighter he
glows,/raised high, enwrapped in star-rays?)

For Miss Norman, the mood of the "Liebestod" was not to be taken from its words, or from the argument of the opera, or even from a more refined and elevated conception of the Prelude than Mr. Mehta offered. Individual words were given exaggerated weight; everything was external, effortful, and frenetic, with even Miss Norman's powerful (often consciously too powerful) voice overtaxed, her last notes suggesting nothing so much as a giant sail flapping in a high wind. Miss Norman seemed concerned at every moment to thrust herself, every inch the careful and calculating *prima donna assoluta*, into the place of the composer's poetic conception, to substitute for Isolde's transfiguration her own personal self-assertion.

All in all, the impression the performance gave was that she had decided to confront personally, and deny, a self-effacing attitude toward art. This was the attitude that T.S. Eliot gave powerful expression to in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" when he wrote that for the artist

[w]hat happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something that is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

The lesson of Eliot's counsel of perfection is surely that the artist must look to the art, not to himself. Such self-abnegation is more difficult today than ever, when art—especially the art of the past—seems dead, while the artist's managers, press agents, and fans are very much alive. We will be told that it was ever thus, and doubtless to some extent this thought, at once comforting and ultimately dispiriting, contains a bit of truth. Singers, like actors, have little choice but to point their lives toward their relatively few and brief moments on the stage; the Latin phrase *carpe diem* has, after all, a special meaning for these larger than life-size creatures.

But the evidence of phonograph records—and it is their chief value, in addition, of course, to the pleasure they give us—shows that, at least in the case of the greatest works of the German operatic stage, times once were better. It has long been known that the two decades from 1920 to 1940 were a golden age of Wagnerian singing in Europe, and here in America as well, at the Metropolitan Opera. This golden age fortunately coincided with the introduction in 1925 of the electrical recording process, a remarkable improvement in the fidelity and amplitude of both vocal and orchestral reproduction. Though the recordings actually made were initially limited to excerpts, the foresight of the legendary producer Fred Gaisberg and his associates at His Master's Voice in England (or at its German affiliate) ensured that the great singers of the age, and some remarkable conductors as well, were captured for posterity.

These recordings, though originally made in the scratchy 78 RPM format and destined to be played *faute de mieux* on the primitive playback equipment of the time, have proved to have a remarkable afterlife. As reproducing technology advanced from recording on wax and pressing on swiftly revolving shellac to recording on tape and pressing on slow-spinning vinyl, concomitant developments in electronics enabled an ever larger amount of the information contained in the original

78 RPM grooves to be reclaimed and made available inexpensively to listeners. In the last years of the LP record, the technique of Direct Metal Mastering made possible a hitherto unknown dynamic range, at minimal distortion, to be incised on the vinyl disc;¹ more to the point here, in the last five years the CD has become a prime medium for making available old recorded performances reclaimed by state-of-the-art techniques.

Several of these important CD re-issues have now appeared, and they have much to tell us about the way things once were in Wagnerian performance. Perhaps the most interesting of these re-issues—because the original discs on which they are based are currently for the most part quite forgotten—are those of major excerpts from *Tristan und Isolde*² and the slightly later *Die Meistersinger*.³ There are also new CDs of excerpts from three components of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: *Die Walküre*,⁴ *Siegfried*,⁵ and *Götterdämmerung*.⁶

The *Tristan* excerpts come from discs made between 1926 and 1929, and present to our lethargic age the remarkable Albert Coates's enthralling conducting of this music. Coates (1882-1953) was an Anglo-Russian, very active in recording for HMV in the 1920s both before and after the advent of electrical recording; by the 1930s, inexplicably, he had quite disappeared from the musical scene. His hundreds of 78 RPM discs are characterized by what can only be called blazing intensity. Nowhere is this more true than in the *Tristan* Prelude with

which this CD begins. But there are other riches here, including the Love Duet from Act II, sung by the legendary tenor Lauritz Melchior and the soprano Frida Leider, both of them artists unequaled today and for many years past. So searing is this performance that one can well believe Leider's account (cited in the notes to the CD) of the making of the recording: she was so excited while singing that she became dizzy and had to hold on to Melchior for support.⁷

The *Tristan* CD ends with a large chunk of Act III, like the Act I Prelude never before transferred, I believe, from the 78 RPM original; this material, beginning with the Prelude and ending with the "Liebestod," is marvelously—and unaffectedly—sung by three artists now unremembered: the English tenor Walter Widdop, the Swedish soprano Göta Ljungberg, and the English baritone Howard Fry. The conductors, rare as their like are today, include Coates, the equally splendid (though less intense) German Leo Blech (1871-1958), and Lawrance Collingwood, one of HMV's highly competent house conductors. Despite all the changes in personnel in these performances, the overall musical conception seems remarkably integrated in its straightforwardness and simplicity; everywhere the music (and the story) is left to take its own hair-raising course.

The very welcome *Meistersinger* excerpts come from an actual performance in 1928 at Berlin's Theater Unter den Linden; its only previous transfer from the 78 RPM originals was on poorly engineered and little-circulated LPs. They represent our only knowledge of a live Berlin opera performance in the 1920s, and present a cast headed by baritone Friedrich Schorr, by all accounts the greatest Hans Sachs who ever lived, and conducted by Blech. The touching

1 For an account of the situation of these old Wagner discs as it appeared at the end of the LP era, and for a memoir of my own experience with the phonograph, see "Growing Up With Old Records" in the April 1984 issue of *The New Criterion*.

2 Claremont/GSE CD GSE 78-50-26.

3 Pearl GEMM CD 9340.

4 Pearl GEMM CD 9357.

5 Danacord DACO CD 319/21. This material first appeared several years ago on LP as Danacord DACO 171-76.

6 Pearl GEMM CD 9331.

7 Further and indispensable Leider performances from *Tristan*, including the 1928 "Narrative and Curse" from Act I and the concluding 1931 "Liebestod," are included on the Pearl *Götterdämmerung* mentioned above, and discussed below.

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young lovers Eva and Walther are Elfriede Marherr and Robert Hutt, singers unknown today; they combine, in an exemplary fashion, the great vocal qualities of security—no flutter, no wobble—and freshness of tone. Pagner, Eva's father, is movingly sung by the great bass Emanuel List. It is a pity that no more than seventy-two minutes has survived of what was evidently a performance recorded in its entirety; what we do have on this CD conveys a stunning impression of a freely flowing ensemble, of singers effortlessly *being*, not premeditatedly acting, their roles.

The *Ring* excerpts are of scarcely less interest. Almost all of the *Walküre* material comes from a 1927 abridgment conducted by Blech and sung by Leider (Brünnhilde), Schorr (Wotan), and Ljungberg (Sieglinde). Wisely, the present CD has filled in the missing but vital Wotan-Fricka dialogue from Act II, from the 1932 discs conducted by John Barbirolli, with Schorr as Wotan and the wonderful contralto Emmi Leisner as his shrewish but nonetheless rich-voiced wife Fricka. Unfortunately (doubtless to

avoid going to a second CD), a significant part of the original 1927 set, the Siegmund-Sieglinde passages from Act I (sung by Widdop and Ljungberg), have been omitted from the present collection,⁸ along with equally important material from the second half of Act II (sung by Widdop and the excellent English Brünnhilde, Florence Austral). But what there is on this CD, so marvelous in musical power and vocal strength, approaches perfection; taken together with the 1930s Vienna recordings, starring the conductor Bruno Walter, the soprano Lotte Lehmann, and Melchior,⁹ this CD makes clear the travesty represented by present-day contemporary Wagner performances, in and out of the opera house.

8 A major part of this material, however, may be found on Pearl GEMM 218, an LP transfer devoted to Walter Widdop.

9 These extraordinary performances, documenting Viennese Wagner performance on the eve of the *Anschluss* in 1938, may now be most easily found together in one set on Danacord DACO CD 317/318.

The *Siegfried* material also has much to tell us. Here is most of the pieced-together abridgment made in the late 1920s, conducted by the unappreciated German *Kapellmeister* Robert Heger (1886-1978), Coates, and Karl Alwin (then the husband of the renowned *Lieder* singer Elisabeth Schumann). The star-studded cast includes Melchior (*Siegfried*), Schorr (*Wanderer*), the sumptuous (but tremulous) contralto Maria Olszewska (*Erda*), and the brilliant English soprano Florence Easton (*Brünnhilde*); it also includes the wonderful character singers Heinrich Tessmer (*Mime*) and Eduard Habich (*Alberich* and *Fafner*). Amidst all these riches it is the virility of Melchior's *Siegfried*, so different in its heedless exuberance from the strangled musicality of today's leading *Heldentenors*, that immediately compels attention. But despite the excellence of all the vocal performances, one thing must not be forgotten: it is the directness of the conducting that makes the overpowering dramatic effect possible, and indeed ineluctable.

Finally, in discussing these new releases, there remains the *Götterdämmerung* CD. Here is a live recording of two conflict-ridden scenes from Act II taken "off the air" from a performance of June 7, 1938, at Covent Garden in London, conducted by the now mythic Wilhelm Furtwängler and sung by Leider (*Brünnhilde*) and Melchior (*Siegfried*); here too is an excellent transfer of Leider's classic 1928 commercial discs of the Immolation Scene that closes the opera, and with it the entire *Ring* cycle.¹⁰ By now we are tempted to take Leider's and Melchior's excellence for granted. What cannot be taken for granted, however, is the musical leadership of the live performance. As a conductor Furtwängler is now celebrated as a "mellow" conductor, an enthusiast for mystical draggings-out of the

rhythmic pulse so constitutive of nineteenth-century music.¹¹ But here at least, as in Furtwängler's two recorded post-World War II *Ring* cycles,¹² his conducting, taut and energetic, is the very soul of sinister and propulsive drama.

As this article is in proof, news comes of the arrival of a CD transfer on the Opal label (England) of all the *Parsifal* recordings made at the 1927 Bayreuth Festival, and at about the same time in Berlin, by the great conductor Karl Muck. Together with the related 1927 Bayreuth recordings conducted by Siegfried Wagner (the composer's son), these unique performances convey the exaltation of Wagner's summation in *Parsifal* of the romantic myth of the artist-savior. But important Wagner recordings of the 1920s still remain unavailable on CD. Among them are many Albert Coates recordings of vocal and orchestral excerpts, including electrically recorded passages from *Das Rheingold*, *Götterdämmerung*, and *Parsifal*, as well as acoustically recorded material from *Götterdämmerung*.

Cui bono? I don't think performances on old records can be copied, for imitation

10 It is sad that Leider's discs of the Immolation Scene end not with the actual orchestral finale of *Götterdämmerung* but rather several minutes too soon, with an absurd "concert ending" tacked on to Brünnhilde's last sung notes.

11 Indeed, to return for a moment to the unfortunate Zubin Mehta, it is difficult not to feel that the single most harmful influence on Mehta and his generation of musicians was the example of Furtwängler's late-career self-indulgences; nowhere were these indulgences to be so noticed, and therefore so slavishly copied, as in his much-worshipped 1952 *Tristan* recording with soprano Kirsten Flagstad. It must be said, too, that Flagstad's effortless ability to spin out endless volumes of creamy vocal tone has induced many without her supreme endowments to sing, like Jessye Norman, slower than slow.

12 The 1950 La Scala *Ring*, with Flagstad as Brünnhilde throughout, was available for some years on various LP transfers of varying quality; the 1953 Rome RIA *Ring*, with a less stellar cast but better sonics, was long available on Seraphim LPs. Both performances are wonderful, and will doubtless soon be available on CD; they are musts for every true Wagnerian.

readily results in exaggeration and even corruption. But there is more to be learned from them than is comprehended by a slavish re-working of the successes of others. The key to the value of these records is what they can teach about the artistic process in general, and in this case about the way a performer must approach the re-creation of a dramatic masterpiece. Earlier I quoted T.S. Eliot's words from "Tradition and the Individual Talent" about the artist's necessary extinction of personality. A passage near the end of that great essay shows that Eliot, in his extraordinary balancing of opposites, also did justice to the importance of personality. Indeed, this passage seems to me to encapsulate the lesson about art to be learned not just from Wagner's music and Eliot's poetry but from the very ideal of tradition itself:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality

and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. . . . The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.

Here, then, is the point of these great old records. The lesson is not easily learned, for learning depends, after all, on both learner and teacher. Still, the lesson is clear: the goal of beauty and meaning in musical performance—what is usually referred to as "expression" and "feeling"—cannot be achieved as an end in itself; it can only be indirectly approached, and then only by the most gifted, through the satisfaction of the most immediate and most compelling demands of the music. As Eliot well knew, only the greatest personalities need apply.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

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Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska *by Robert Phillips*

The humanities debate at Williams College *by Roger Kimball*

Viva Velázquez

by Jed Perl

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has done so many problematical and downright awful painting shows in the past few years that the end-to-end perfection of this autumn's Velázquez retrospective may leave museumgoers giddy with happiness and disbelief.¹ By the time "Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment" rolled around last spring, many of my friends didn't even want to take a look. A museum that had already wasted a big retrospective on the slick tricks of Boucher, stretched Fragonard's delicate genius beyond the breaking point, and turned Zurbarán into a dull and ultimately saccharine artist was certainly not going to know what to do with an eighteenth-century Spaniard who could be playful one day, Michelangelesque the next. And "Goya" did turn out to be another of those messes that you left wondering, "what's it all about?" The paintings and prints were carcasses dragged in to illustrate some thesis about revolutionary Europe, a thesis that you didn't get or, if you did get it, you disagreed with. A show like this sours you on masterpieces: they become pawns in a megabuster game.

1 "Velázquez" is on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art until January 7, 1990. The exhibition's curator is Everett Fahy, chairman of the department of European paintings at the Metropolitan. The catalogue, with essays by Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez, and Julián Gállego, is published by the Metropolitan and Abrams; 286 pages, \$45.

The Metropolitan has fared better with its shows of late nineteenth-century masters, no doubt because there isn't so much difficulty in establishing a *raison d'être*. Manet, Van Gogh, and Degas are legendary figures—big box office—and the retrospectives of their work are foolproof popular hits. A Van Gogh or Degas show puts itself over, and thus speaks the only language—the language of crowds and cash registers—that the Metropolitan management can be sure to understand. Meanwhile, recent exhibits of the sculpture of the Pisano family and the painters of Siena have been saved by their very irrelevance. These early Renaissance events, tucked away in the Lehman Wing, are so out of sync with the Met's mega mentality that they manage to triumph through institutional neglect. Left to find their own level, they become sleeper hits.

The trouble with "Boucher," "Fragonard," "Zurbarán," and "Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment" is that the Metropolitan, along with whatever other organizers are involved, will neither do right by them nor leave them alone. The museum has conceived these as star-personality shows without any clear conception of what those stars might mean to the people who come and take a look. But these shows aren't merely the product of innocent miscalculation. There is a cynicism involved in this transformation of major moments of Western art into box-office fodder. A museum that has frequently been criticized for serving up bread and

circuses may believe that scholarly catalogues the size of the New York City telephone book will silence the critics. Having been blasted for “Harlem on My Mind,” the Met now offers “Rococo on My Mind”—Parts I and II. These retrospectives are megabusters for intellectuals—King Tut with scholarly catalogues—but the scholarship just becomes another kind of media blitz: a media blitz that intellectuals are embarrassed to complain about.

The problem over at the Met isn’t that they think of museum shows in terms of showmanship; it’s that they’re often such ineffectual, lowest-common-denominator showmen. Time and again the Met misses the internal logic of what they’re presenting: they don’t know what to make of it, and so you get retrospective after retrospective where you reach the end and look at your companion and say “Huh?” Fragonard’s butterfly-weight genius deserves butterfly-weight presentation; instead, they clobber him. Goya’s variegated achievement deserves an installation that lays out the story without editorializing; instead, they serve up an Age of Reason rationale. All the more amazing, then, that the people who run the museum have allowed Velázquez to work his miracles in peace. In part, it may be that Velázquez is such an extraordinarily great artist that you can’t ruin a Velázquez show. But it is also apparent that Velázquez’s greatness, his direct appeal, has actually inspired the staffers at the Met. For once they’ve done without those dark, sepulchral walls and floors they love. Somebody woke up and realized that Velázquez’s theatrical sense is so assured that the museum needn’t bother with its usual theatrical presentation. Amen. The carpeting is light gray; the rooms are painted in a series of sandy pale tones—taupe, yellow, gray-blue, green. There’s plenty of ambient light. You can see across the rooms and you can see the paintings. When you come out you don’t feel that you’ve left a bordello or Plato’s cave—you carry the whole experience of this light-filled and effortlessly unfolding show into the clear light of New York in its autumn glory.

“Velázquez” is the perfect autumn-in-New York show. Even the artist’s dark passages have a pearly lucidity. Nevertheless, the world of kings and queens and courtiers and scholar-ambassadors out of which this art emerged is alien and more than a little incredible to us. Diego de Velázquez thrusts this lost universe upon us, gives us the sense of *then* becoming *now*. On leaving the show, one naturally wants to know more about Velázquez’s life and times (he was born in 1599 and died in 1660). Reading about him in the very impressive book by Jonathan Brown that came out a couple of years ago,² one enters a fully dimensional world. As a youth in Seville, Velázquez was apprenticed to the painter Francisco Pacheco (author of an important treatise, *Arte de la pintura*), who initiated the young artist into the idea of the artist’s life as related to traditions of scholarship and classical learning and refinement. At the court of Philip IV in Madrid, in 1628, Velázquez met Rubens, who was in Spain as an emissary from the Infanta Isabella, governor of the Netherlands, and they became friends, and Rubens encouraged Velázquez to see Italy. There is a great deal that we do not know about Velázquez, but Jonathan Brown has the true art historian’s genius for letting what facts there are expand in our imagination: the great, gloomy palace interiors lined with masterpieces by Titian and Rubens come back to life, and we find ourselves inside the elaborately ritualized routine of the court.

Of Velázquez’s trips to Italy—in 1629-30 and 1649-51—we have sketchy information; and yet through the surviving records of his contacts with officials and ambassadors who were also collectors we can assume a close acquaintance with the art and artists of Rome’s last great age. Velázquez’s Europe is the Europe of Bernini and Borromini, Poussin and Rubens; of grandly symmetrical façades and S-curves and ovals; of velvet and gold and richly veined marbles; of angels and *trompe l’oeil* decor and ceilings scattered

2 *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier*, by Jonathan Brown, was published by Yale University Press in 1986.



Elihu Vedder (1836-1923), *A Reverie*, painted in Rome in 1868-70-72
Oil on canvas, 13 1/8 x 8 inches

This painting by Elihu Vedder is included in the exhibition, *The Italian Presence in American Art, 1860-1920*, on view November 17-December 29, 1989.

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with clouds of powdery pink. It's a world that we can experience as a fantasy—the kind of fantasy, full of embroidered costumes and grotesque characters, that Fellini would gladly drop fifty million dollars to resurrect on the sound stages of Cinecittà. Velázquez has a Fellini side to him: both artists see life as a somewhat inhuman pageant. Only for Velázquez, who actually lived that life, the combination of the inhuman and the human isn't grotesque. Velázquez does what we wish Fellini knew how to do: he lets us glory in the fantasy and then he has one of his characters cast his eyes upon us in a way that says, "This fantasy is a reality."

Philip IV was a considerable connoisseur of painting, and Velázquez devoted a great deal of time in the later decades of his life to acquiring works for the royal collections and to designing the rooms where they would be displayed. Philip would have understood that art can make a unity that improves upon the unity of courtly life; he was the kind of man that people are thinking of when they speak of a time when the hereditary aristocracy was also an aristocracy of taste. In any event, the collection that Philip IV's predecessors had begun, and to which he devoted tremendous energy and huge sums, created the conditions for Velázquez's evolution as an artist. Without the king's collection, Velázquez could never have gone from the awkward and astonishing masterpieces of his early years—*The Waterseller* and *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs*, with their dark clarity—to a style that completely overturned the sculptrally oriented painting of the Renaissance.

Titian's late manner had given brushwork a precedence once afforded to modeled form; but Titian organized his late works in a shallow, stable space derived from classical relief sculpture, and so maintained his classical ties. It was from Rubens that Velázquez learned to understand Titian; but Rubens, who could give up neither the firmly defined forms of the High Renaissance nor the verismo of northern Europe, never let the colored brushstroke loose in anything like the way Velázquez did. It's in Velázquez that

the light-dark of the Renaissance finally gives way to a shimmering silvery-gray world. A new kind of color emerges: from colored objects, we move to colored air. Fifty years later, Watteau, also coming out of Titian via Rubens, does something similar; and although Watteau may in no way have been inspired by Velázquez, these two artists are the true heirs of Giorgione and Titian. In his book, Jonathan Brown invokes a modernist interpretation of Velázquez when he says that "he seems to have arrived intuitively at the understanding of the dual nature of the art of painting, namely its ability simultaneously to create form and to express its own essence." But I rather think that the miracle of Velázquez—and of Watteau, too—is that they do both without making us conscious of the duality. This is what accounts for the strange quality of their work, that it is both evanescent and absolute. In these pearly emulsions the theater of life and the theater of art hold together. When the portrait of Louis XIV is put in a packing crate in Watteau's *Shopsign* of 1721—the portrait of the king who married the daughter of Philip IV and whose military strength had left Philip IV melancholic, feeling that he had failed his ancestors and his people—at that point the ancien régime is collapsing in art as well as in life. We are on the verge of the heroism of modern art, heroic because it involves the invention of a unity in a world that doesn't know from unity.

Part of the pleasure we take in older art derives from our feeling that the great artists contain both the past and the future—that their visions stand at some unique intersection of before and after. The seventeenth century has more of this Janus-faced aspect than any other period, perhaps because from our perspective it marks the point where medieval and Catholic Europe is definitively transmogrified into the modern and secular world that we still inhabit today. When we say that the tiny landscapes that Velázquez did at the Villa Medici in Rome contain all of nineteenth-century landscape painting; or that Annibale Carracci's *Bean Eater* could be

a Courbet; or that the domestic scenes in Rembrandt's drawings are like outtakes from our everyday lives—what we're saying is that these artists seem to leap forward, that their consciousness seems to contain what is to come.

Velázquez's portraits have this contemporary quality, too, an immediacy that's set into relief by the alien formality of the courtly dress. My god, we think, these royals are like us. (You can't be so sure about that when you look at a news photo of Queen Elizabeth II.) Jonathan Brown believes that the unusual realism of Velázquez's portraits is connected to the very self-conception of the Spanish royalty, who traditionally believed that "only the greatest of the great could afford to dispense with the trappings of majesty and feel the confidence to face the world without the aid of rhetoric or theatricality." (That tells you why Queen Elizabeth has to fake it.)

But the astonishing connections between the Catholic portraits by Velázquez and the Protestant portraits by Rembrandt call for some broader explanation as well. In Arnold Hauser's great *Social History of Art* Velázquez is not mentioned (the chapter on "The Baroque of the Catholic Courts" centers on France); but Velázquez seems to exemplify some of the tendencies that Hauser describes in that gloriously generalizing style of his. "Naturalism," Hauser explains,

remained by no means the exclusive property of the middle class. Like rationalism, it became for all classes of society an indispensable intellectual weapon in the struggle for existence. Not only business success, but also success at court and in the *salons* presupposed psychological acumen and a subtle knowledge of men. And even though the rise of the middle class and the beginnings of modern capitalism had given the first impetus to the formation of that anthropology with which the history of modern psychology begins, nevertheless, the real origin of our art of psychological dissection is to be found at the courts and in the *salons* of the seventeenth century.

Velázquez is hardly the only court artist in whose painting we see this new, coolly analytical approach to portraiture at work. Even amidst the flamboyance of Rubens's Maria de Medici cycle, the queen herself is often very acutely, very modestly represented. But Velázquez is the summa of courtly realism.

What ties together his king and queen and infanta and pope and nobleman and servant and dwarf and buffoon is the artist's absolute refusal to sentimentalize—to claim that one can bare a person's soul. There's something ice cold about Velázquez's faith in the truth of surfaces: the blush of a cheek, the glint of an eye. And yet this was an age so absorbed in the first promise of empirical truth that the coldness of the naturalist could become very warm, could point toward something divine. A naturalist without skepticism—this is Velázquez, and this is why such peculiar conceptions as the casually informal painting of a downcast Mars, god of war, manages to be mythical and psychological and perhaps emblematic without skipping a beat or violating our confidence. I can think of no other artist who knows so precisely the exact line that separates sentiment from sentimentality. Rembrandt, a very different case, doesn't know the difference; he just puts sentimentality over with so much pictorial conviction that we can't but accept it.

Like last season's Courbet show at the Brooklyn Museum, the Velázquez show does not contain the artist's great synthesizing paintings. Given the danger that shipping poses to works of art, it would have been the sheerest insanity to send *Las Meninas* or the *Fable of Arachne*. But the Met show—which already contains seventeen works from the Prado—doesn't need *Las Meninas*. In this sort of unforced presentation (reminiscent, again, of the Courbet show) the gathering together of a few dozen paintings creates a logic of its own. When next you see these paintings, you will remember them as they were here; and that's a nice thing to be saying about a Met show, which is generally an occasion when you feel

that the paintings are being held against their will.

It is common in New York in the fall to pick up the telephone and hear people lamenting the provincial character of New York's museums. "After the Louvre, how can I face a third-rate place like the Met?" a friend will ask. A month later, we have re-adjusted: we have to work with what we have. But this fall, with Velázquez at the Met and "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism" at the Modern, New Yorkers are the luckiest museum-goers alive. We deserve it. As "Velázquez" and "Pioneering Cubism" opened at the very end of September, the gallery scene was off to a slow and ambivalent start. The week before I saw "Velázquez" I'd been making the rounds uptown and downtown, and it all seemed so tired, so overblown. News item: lead is the out material, gold leaf is the in material. Reviewers are trying to work themselves up over Sherrie Levine's Duchampian nonsense at Mary Boone—glass objects in wood vitrines—but does anybody really care? I was held by Spencer Gregory's paintings at the Sorkin Gallery—small, dark abstractions that are mystical and geometric, but in ways that aren't instantly categorizable—I will have to take another look.

From the midst of all this it's good to have two great, inexorably great shows, not as some absolute standard against which to measure everything else and watch everything else fail, but as a prod, an inspiration. These shows open out into the artistic life

of the city. Frank Stella can do his Frank Stella shtick on Velázquez (in the Sunday *Times* on October 1), announcing that "Rothko's 'Untitled,' 1969, a late work in black and white, has a silver shimmer that makes a good start at recalling Velázquez. Another example is Newman's magnificent 'Ulysses,' 1952." I don't know if there's anyone left who can tolerate this shopworn formalism. Others of us will do our own shticks. But lordy, lordy: that big late portrait of Queen Mariana that closes the Met show—it's unstoppable. That black and brown and silver dress, an overscaled volume climbing up from the floor, rises, tapers, to the perfect climax of a little-girl head. It is a commonplace to observe the oddity of those faces stuck in those costumes, but in this most complete of portraits it isn't odd, it's inevitable. Doña Mariana of Austria married Philip IV when he was over forty, she under fifteen. Shortly afterward she had a daughter, Infanta Margarita, who became the subject of *Las Meninas*. From the catalogue we learn that Queen Mariana "was cheerful, fond of luxury and diversion. In 1657, on the occasion of her lord's birthday, Mariana spent no less than four thousand ducats on apparel of *imitation* gold and silver, lest people say she was spending so much in such hard times." But "at the same time rigorous court ceremonial oppressed Mariana's spirits. The lady of the chamber would rebuke her for laughing at the antics of the buffoons." Until January 7, all of New York City is Queen Mariana's court. Viva Velázquez.

What is literature? What is not?

by Renee Winegarten

The publication of Harvard's *A New History of French Literature* prompts the query: to whom is it addressed?¹ According to the Introduction, it is intended for the general reader. This elusive character must have become singularly erudite of late, and much concerned with the latest critical views, or at least those of the day before yesterday. Perhaps it might be more reasonable to anticipate that the prospective readers of this work, with its varied essays by diverse hands, would be graduate students and possibly fellow academics.

Take the chapter by Richard L. Regosin concerned with Montaigne's self-questioning *Essais* (1588), one of the most diverting, profoundly human, and humane documents in world literature. The trouble is that in certain circles, sometime during the last thirty years or so, words like "human," "humane values," and "humanism" have become terribly old hat. To approach Montaigne, we are now invited to follow "Nietzsche, Freud, Saussure, Heidegger, and Derrida" (who are among the veritable saints of the cult of present-day literary criticism). We are also urged to question the existence of a "self-sufficient subject" and to regard form, subjectivity, and history "as part of a dynamic and multilayered textual system." Such rebarbative jargon has

become all too familiar. As part of an ideology, it works to reduce the role of the author or mere human being to zero.

All the same, Montaigne's random probings into his contradictory being have proved endlessly provocative to readers down the ages, without the need of any sustaining theory. His essays can still give immense pleasure, another word that is not much favored in *A New History of French Literature*. During the savagery of the sixteenth-century religious and civil wars, Montaigne's pre-Voltairean disinclination to prize his "conjectures" so highly as to have someone burned at the stake for them remains touching. As he once wrote piquantly, in the old style: "au plus eslevé throsne du monde, si ne sommes nous assis que sur nostre cul" ("on the loftiest of thrones, we are only sitting on our backside")—always a useful reminder to political dictators or spiritual directors of whatever variety.

This "new" or modern history of French literature—who needs an "old" one?—is constructed according to an idiosyncratic system, without any apparent overall design. A date conjures an event, the composition or publication of a book, or some artistic, cultural, or political manifestation. These in turn offer the pretext or starting point for a theme that may or may not be strictly literary in character or purport. According to the Introduction, the impression that is sought is one of "heterogeneity." For in-

1 *A New History of French Literature*, edited by Denis Hollier; Harvard University Press, 1,150 pages, \$49.95.

stance, there are sections where much space is allotted to opera (the eighteenth-century war between the supporters of the composers Gluck and Piccinni); to the analysis of *mentalités* in history; to ethnography and sociology; to Picasso's *Guernica*; to the cinema of Truffaut and Godard. (Is their "cinematic *écriture*" literature? Surely not, since the script, however good, is subordinate to the image.) Chapters of this kind may be regarded largely as studies of intellectual or cultural movements, often useful in themselves as instruments to background knowledge, but secondary to literature as such. Where indeed does literature stand in this *galère*?

Still, as we well know, and are often reminded in this volume, Jean-Paul Sartre once famously inquired "What is literature?" (some years before he declared "Literature is shit"). His admirers or disciples follow jesting Pilate who asked "What is truth?" and did not stay for an answer. Or rather, they do give an answer of sorts, and it is that literature is now anything and everything (or nothing?). As the editor of this volume incredibly puts it: "One enters literature by leaving it. There is no reliable checkpoint; it is impossible to say where it starts and where it ends. Literature is engrossed by what takes its place." Would anyone say music or medicine is "engrossed by what takes its place"? Only literature seems to have to suffer from this sort of negative stance or failure of nerve.

In addition, we are informed that "the question today is no longer, as it still was for Sartre, 'What is literature?' but rather, 'What is not?'" This seems to me to be a total abdication of the faculty of discrimination, essential in the assessment of literary works—what T. S. Eliot once tellingly called "the common pursuit of true judgment," which he saw as the real task of the critic. Since the editor has so little faith in literature itself, it might have been more honest, if possibly less commercial, to entitle this volume something like *Essays on French Culture and Civilization*, instead of *A New History of French Literature*, since it is neither a history

nor primarily concerned with the *art* of literature, its importance and value.

The choice of dates for each of the 199 chapters often seems odd and arbitrary: 1789 for the Revolution, of course, but no 1793 when the Terror began. (By the way, it should be noted in future editions that the firebrand courtesan Théroigne de Méricourt did not perish during the Revolution, but died in an insane asylum in 1817.) There is no 1815 (the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo being thought too "Eurocentric," perhaps?); no 1870 for the Franco-Prussian War, but naturally 1871 for the uprising of the Paris Commune; and two entries under 1968, a date that is mentioned in and out of season and that seems to carry with it a symbolic significance. It sometimes appears as if the Dark Ages came to an end around 1960.

Most strikingly, the work offers a very full account of literary criticism and theory, or writing about literature, rather than an evaluation of literature itself. Indeed, the amount of space given to literary critics and theorists is nothing less than astonishing. An entire chapter is devoted to Gustave Lanson, Ferdinand Brunetière, and other literary historians. A worthy critic like Jean Paulhan, editor of *La nouvelle revue française* from 1925 to 1940, receives as much notice as many a major imaginative writer. And so does the magazine *Tel quel*, founded in 1960, onetime partisan of Mao and of the cultural revolution in China, a journal which has a long chapter to itself. In some instances, a truly great literary figure is buried under the weight or irrelevance of present-day critical shibboleths.

The lofty Corneille is among the sufferers. Mitchell Greenberg's account of the plot of Corneille's *Le Cid* (first performed in late 1636 or early 1637) offers no hint of the extraordinary spirit of exaltation that the play once gave and still can give in performance—and, after all, it was written for the stage, whose demands ought to be taken into account. The word "love," so vital to an understanding of the public and private

moral dilemmas posed by the play, is put in inverted commas. No doubt “love” has gone down the critical drain along with “truth” and magnanimity. Without some appreciation of magnanimity or greatness of soul, Corneille’s dramas are unlikely to make much sense.

We are told, furthermore, that none of Corneille’s tragedies “after 1642 equaled the four early masterpieces in power and grace.” These denigratory words might well have been written before Robert Brasillach’s celebrated revaluation of Corneille, published as long ago as 1938. A visit to the Comédie Française to see, for instance, a performance of *Nicomède* (1650 or 1651)—brilliantly and resonantly performed there only last season to general public acclaim—should inspire a revision of such an unappreciative view. A goodly number of Corneille’s later works still have much to recommend them. (By the way, his enchanting play *L’Illusion comique*, first performed in 1636—not 1645, as stated on page 273—should be translated more nearly as “Dramatic Illusion” than as “The Comic Illusion.”)

As for Racine (“Racine and the French New Criticism”), we learn of the controversy stimulated by Raymond Picard’s *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture?* in 1965 (hardly vital today, but anything produced in the decade of the Sixties is assumed to be of earth-shattering importance). We learn also in detail about the views of noted critics like Lucien Goldmann, Charles Mauron, and Roland Barthes. Apparently all this critical activity served at last to rescue Racine from centuries of “mummification”—never mind all those down the ages who have loved and reflected upon Racine’s dramatic poetry on the page or in the theater, without the benefit of the latest critical dispensation. Something strange has happened to the sexes when we are given the mishmash of “a dominant father (Agrippine as well as Agamemnon) controlling the life of his sons (Athalie as well as Néron),” whereas Agrippine is the mother of Néron (in *Britannicus*) and Athalie is the biblical queen Athaliah (in

Athalie). Dare we venture to suggest that closer attention should be paid to Racine’s work itself rather than to critical theories about it, however interesting or stimulating such theories may sometimes prove to be in their proper, and ultimately subordinate, place?

By the time we come to Romantic poetry, the effect is frequently depressing. Quotations throughout the two volumes are given in translation as a matter of policy, so that all the poets, from Ronsard to Baudelaire and beyond, sound the same: namely, pedestrian. It is a pity that space was not found to show both French and English verse in juxtaposition. The net result is that the reader must begin to wonder what all the fuss has been about. One mysterious exception to this policy is some lines by Voltaire, not normally considered a poetic genius, quoted in French. It must seem odd that in a book where so much emphasis is placed on language, sensitivity to the actual sound, the music of poetry, plays so little part.

The poet and politician Alphonse de Lamartine, who admittedly has not had a good press for some time, for political as well as literary reasons, is submitted to feminist criticism with predictable results. This may make the present-day reader feel superior to him, but what is the point of projecting onto him concerns that he did not have? Besides, what looks “conventional” nowadays was not at all conventional in 1820: even the stoic Alfred de Vigny actually wept over his colleague’s poetry. There is more to Lamartine, supreme poet of grief, than “essentially” one poem, “Le Lac,” as we are advised here. He did not remain static, and his important epic poem *Jocelyn* found its way onto the Index of literature prohibited to Roman Catholics.

A similar failure of appreciation and tone of distaste underlie Nathaniel Wing’s comments on Alfred de Musset, patronized for employing “Romantic stereotypes.” Again the reader is reminded of present-day considerations “about the self and language” at the poet’s expense. Elsewhere, in Richard

Terdiman's essay on Bonapartism, Victor Hugo is surprisingly included among writers whose careers "flourished" during the Second Empire—a curious verb to apply to a poet who became famous in 1822, and who went into voluntary exile after the coup d'état of December 2, 1851. For some eighteen years, from his island retreat, he never ceased to thunder against the Emperor Napoleon III until that adventurer's downfall in 1870. To speak of Victor Hugo's "lack of evolution" is equally peculiar or perverse: his immense variety of form, his capacity for self-renewal, his probing curiosity, his changing views over a long career never cease to amaze.

It is good that women writers should at last receive attention and should be given their due. One might query, however, the sense of proportion that grants the once neglected poet, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, a chapter to herself, while splitting up major novelists like Stendhal and Balzac among different chapters, so that their importance and stature appear diminished. Criticism of what is seen as Stendhal's patriarchal view of pleasure is unlikely to send prospective readers to taste the idiosyncratic delights of *La chartreuse de Parme*, the novel which perhaps best displays the love of risk, the cult of honor, the ideal of passion carried to the point of folly by rare spirits, in short, everything that Stendhal liked to call his *espagnolisme*. Women writers now receive all the benefit of feminist criticism, while men writers have to endure its cutting edge. In fairness, it should be possible to restore the balance without seeking to undermine true merit, wherever it is to be found.

Moreover, while on the subject of proportion, the Marquis de Sade receives more attention than he deserves. Influential though the loathsome writings of that erotomaniac were throughout the nineteenth century and beyond—as Mario Praz (absent from the bibliography) revealed in *The Romantic Agony*, published in English translation as long ago as 1933—one might question why the divine Marquis should be

discussed in two separate chapters when his literary merit is negligible, and when no less a figure than Proust has only one chapter devoted solely to himself.

To return to feminism: an attempt to restore George Sand to the canon on the basis of matriarchy/idealism versus patriarchy/realism seems otiose. George Sand has already been restored to the literary map by Georges Lubin—the editor of her vast correspondence and her autobiographical writings—whose vital role is not credited in the bibliography. Through his painstaking and disinterested scholarship, the entire field of George Sand studies has been opened up, new light has been shed on many aspects of nineteenth-century thought, and now most of her novels, long crumbling on dusty shelves, have been reprinted.

The richness of George Sand's imagination, the immense variety of her literary projects (which influenced writers as diverse as Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Henry James), cannot blind her deepest admirers—among whom I count myself—to the fact that she never produced a single work of art to rank with *Madame Bovary*, which was in some respects a response to her outlook. She herself modestly admitted as much to Flaubert. Such a view has nothing to do with patriarchy and everything to do with art. Surely it is not necessary to try to devalue or demote Flaubert in order to elevate George Sand. We are fortunate indeed: we can have both in all their distinctiveness.

Although more humane than Flaubert, more active, more diverse, and more wide-ranging in her sympathies, she was not a perfectionist, as he was. Presumably, in a history of literature, we should be concerned with the *art* of literature, but this word does not loom large in this volume. (Sorry, I forgot: the great work of art is now regarded as a kind of "tomb"—see the chapter on Proust.) Generalizations do figure prominently, however: it is incorrect to say that virtue is "always rewarded" in George Sand's work. There is, for example, that remarkable tale, *Leone Leoni* (1834), which charts a woman's undying passion for a vicious rogue, a study in

spellbinding evil that could still arouse Henry James's admiration as late as 1899.

Given the critical bias of this "new" history of French literature, with its modish general tendency to undermine much that is worthwhile in Western humanism and the European contribution to civilization, it comes as no surprise to find a chapter on "Orientalism, Colonialism" by Christopher L. Miller, which follows the simplistic but influential thesis of Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978). Thus the nineteenth-century fascination with the Near East and North Africa is seen solely as a form of domination, as "a question of power," when it represented also a scholarly desire for knowledge and discovery, an expansion of sympathy on the part of many poets and painters, a quest for artistic renewal. Victor Hugo's words on the subject are dismissed in favor of "a late twentieth-century perspective," namely, that of Edward Said and his disciples.

Here, poor Lamartine once again gets some stick for propagating the idea of a European "civilizing mission" in the account of his journey to the Near East, which was published in 1835. Today, of course, only the exploitation is considered. Few like to remember those honorable, unsung colonial servants who actually did some good in saving lives. And nobody chooses to recall those who were outraged by exploitation and who opposed it at the time. The now despised Lamartine once said to Nassau William Senior, during the Second Empire, that French conduct in Algeria was "a disgrace to our sense and to our humanity . . . we had no right to seize a country as large as France, occupied by many tribes," where the French were condemned to repeated cycles of violence. Doubts, second thoughts, developments, contradictions in an author can only be perceived when the work is studied as a whole, and when the critic strives to suppress, as far as humanly possible, any private prejudices and preconceptions.

The account of French literature in this

volume is far from all-embracing, and there are some glaring omissions. Where is a presently unfashionable master of the French language like the equivocal Henry de Montherlant? Anathema to feminists for his controversial quartet of novels, *Les Jeunes filles* (1936-9), Montherlant, powerful novelist and dramatist, is mentioned only as a collaborator during the German Occupation of 1940-44, for his collection of essays on diverse subjects, *Le Solstice de juin* (1941). In fact, he did not collaborate actively with the Nazis on the same joyful terms as such ardent fascists as Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and Robert Brasillach, and he was not prosecuted at the Liberation. Although he is artistically their superior, it is they who are discussed at length and who take precedence.

In *A New History of French Literature*, too, there are to be found the overpraised Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett (only partially a writer in French), but no attention is paid to the multifaceted work of the poet, novelist, and dramatist Jean Cocteau, cursorily named alongside homosexual writers including Genet in the section entitled "From Exoticism to Homosexuality." Strangely, Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1949) receives a mention, but not the play of 1926 on which it is based. However, Cocteau—like Montherlant—belonged to no particular literary group.

If readers wish to know what is being said about French literature and kindred matters up to 1985 in current right-thinking critical circles, then this volume is for them. Above all, this book offers the apotheosis of the literary theorist. It consecrates the critical fashions of today that will be gone tomorrow. Literary criticism, founded on liberal and disinterested scholarship, is a matter of sensibility and judgment, after all; it is not a kind of ukase to which we are forced to submit. Literature itself is embattled enough nowadays without the general drift of this tome, a mode of discourse that contrives to undercut so much that is really great, and that comes, as it were, not to praise Caesar but to bury him.

Reader, run

John Updike Just Looking: Essays on Art. Knopf, 210 pages, \$35

John Ashbery Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987. Edited by David Bergman. Knopf, 417 pages, \$35

reviewed by Deborah Solomon

Who could be indifferent to the news that two of America's most celebrated writers—John Updike and John Ashbery—are publishing collections of art criticism this fall? They've each won nearly every prize the literary establishment has to offer, one for fiction, the other for poetry. We approach their collections of art criticism with high expectations; we might assume, and not unfairly, that their writing will be a model of intelligence and clarity, that it will soar above the muddle that nowadays passes for serious discourse in art magazines and exhibition catalogues, that perhaps it will even establish its authors as rightful heirs to a tradition exemplified by Baudelaire, Valéry, Proust, Apollinaire, etc.—the tradition of the literary art critic. But we are soon disappointed.

Just Looking, the collection by Updike, has a cute, self-dismissive title that seems to apologize for the book's existence. At first, we feel a bit charmed by Updike's unnecessary modesty. Yet as we start reading, we're surprised to realize that the title isn't intended ironically. Updike really is just looking—looking at paintings and describing what he sees. In a typical piece, he offers an elegantly phrased discussion of a favorite work of art, yet he rarely goes beyond surface details. And while his longer pieces attempt to proffer critical judgments, it would be hard to call them sharp or decisive. Reviewing the Renoir show at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1985, for example, he writes: "Renoir does not quite rank with the heroic masters of early modern painting." It's a cautious statement—an obvious understatement—but even so

Updike feels obliged to take it back a few sentences later. "Such is the sour mood of unappreciation induced by a megashow. Poor Renoir, he didn't ask for this." Ask for what? Here as elsewhere, Updike is a guilt-ridden critic, reluctant to question established reputations.

Updike has been writing on art for about a decade. He occasionally reviews museum exhibitions for *The New Republic*, and he has written a handful of short, light-as-air essays for glossy magazines like *Vanity Fair* and *Travel & Leisure*. If he seems uncomfortable expressing his opinions, more problematic is the limiting nature of his tastes and interests. For one thing, he is not a chronicler of the new. As he blithely acknowledges in the introductory essay: "Op was the last art movement I enjoyed, and Minimalism the last one I was aware of; I could not adjust to artworks that lay on the floor." Art criticism, for Updike, is essentially an exercise in nostalgia, a means of recapturing the genteel tastes and values of his youth. If he feels any allegiance to a tradition, it is to realism. He seems to value technical facility more than originality to such an extent that he writes sympathetically about Andrew Wyeth, whose "fifteen years of friendly interest in Helga," he feels, has left us with "a treasurable residue."

He writes about more adventurous artists as well—Degas, Monet, Modigliani. Yet it isn't their questing spirit that interests him. Rather, it's their relation to an art that's faithful to visual reality. He says of Degas that his "most brilliant and characteristic achievement might be described as the patient invention of the snapshot, before the camera itself was technically able to arrest motion." Updike gets so carried away looking for painted snapshots of reality that he ends up arguing that Modigliani was primarily concerned with the "attentive rendition of the real." Modigliani as a realist? About the artist's *Grand Nu*, which is in the Museum of Modern Art, Updike muses: "Women *do* feel to us that long and gently undulant in the waist." Who is the "us" here?

Updike's admiration for the realistically rendered subject gets him into trouble when he tries to write about abstract art. In his one essay on an abstract painter—Richard Diebenkorn—he starts off by saying that the artist's *Ocean Park No. 79* makes him feel as if he's "inside a beach house, looking out of a big window at the sea." But then he changes his mind. The image, after all, is flat as a board; its linear elements "create no space that would house us." Once he's told us what the painting isn't—it isn't a beach house—where can he go? Nowhere. One of the problems with relying on an anti-formalist or literary approach is that modern art is, among other things, a wholesale rejection of literary content, and trying to describe it in narrative terms is inappropriate. Updike knows this, and it may be one of the reasons he's more at home in the nineteenth century than in our own.

Updike is most valuable as a critic when he's describing how things look and what makes them beautiful. His strength is in the precision of his images. He writes of Degas's use of pastel: "Chalk on paper has a slight graininess that answers to the texture of skin." He recalls Brancusi's *Bird in Space* as a "polished bronze that etherealized the viewer into an elongate reflection." In Renoir's late work, the "shimmering, breezy outdoors of Impressionism gradually grows furry and comes indoors and in the end becomes a kind of tapestry, a green-and-blue background scrubbed in behind nudes." One can open to almost any page of Updike's book and find observations as vivid as these. As we read along and check his descriptions against the work he's talking about (and his book is illustrated with excellent photographs), his comments often seem right on the mark.

Yet, despite his wonderful writing, Updike's essays (there are twenty-three altogether) don't have the weight or the urgency one expects from a first-rate writer. Perhaps that's because he seems most comfortable when he's down on his knees, expressing reverence. In his piece on Modigliani he tells a peculiar anecdote; he once wrote a letter

to the Museum of Modern Art suggesting that the artist's *Grand Nu*, which was hanging near a heavily trafficked exit, be moved to a safer location. The museum responded by placing a sheet of protective glass over the canvas. Updike was ecstatic: "I feel I have entered, in a minute way, art history—have reached out toward a masterpiece, and touched it." Updike's fawning tone is unworthy of a man of his intelligence.

For all the modesty Updike brings to his criticism, the book as a whole gives off an air of self-congratulation. The cover features a color photograph that shows the author admiring some Matisse's at the Museum of Modern Art. He is pictured from the back, his hands clasped behind him, his dark silhouette contrasting sharply with the whiteness of the museum's walls. It's almost as if he's supposed to look like a Matisse cut-out. But instead he looks more like a New England pilgrim—a prim and proper man clad in black, a Puritan lost amid the hedonism of French art. That Updike appears on the cover of his book with his face coyly hidden explains what's wrong with his art criticism. His modesty is excessive—and it's also ostentatious. What comes across in the end is less the charm he sees in his subjects than the charm he sees in himself and his facility with English prose.

Unlike Updike, who writes about art as an interested outsider, John Ashbery is an art-world insider. During a ten-year stay in France—where he'd gone as a Fulbright fellow in 1955—a friend casually offered him her reviewing job at the Paris *Herald Tribune*; thus began his career as a "sort of art critic." From 1965 until 1972, he was the executive editor of *Art News* magazine; later, he was a staff critic for *New York* magazine and *Newsweek*. *Reported Sightings* is a thick volume that brings together about a hundred essays written over a thirty-year period; one of the best things about the book is its sweep. To flip through its pages is to travel between the Paris of the Sixties (there is "a Pop Art dress shop in the rue du Bac called

Popard") and the New York of the Seventies ("everything, with the possible exception of the environment itself, is suddenly an environment"). While Ashbery's poetry is notoriously difficult to understand, his art criticism strives for accessibility. It's a mixture of gossip, reportage, artists' shoptalk, and bar-stool philosophizing, and at times it has a you-were-there vividness.

Two critic-friends whose opinions I respect recently told me they enjoyed Ashbery's book. So it is with more than a little guilt (maybe it's Updike's influence on me) that I confess I didn't like the book at all; I didn't like a single page of it. Ashbery, to be sure, is an enthusiastic writer, but he's also an exceedingly sloppy one, at least in his prose; he doesn't take much care with either his language or his ideas. His book is a grab bag of clichés, mixed metaphors, and awkward phrases. Reviewing a 1978 exhibition at the Whitney called "Art About Art," Ashbery observes: "No sooner has the artist dealt with his reactions to the art of the past than he finds himself being wound on the spool of art history and is done unto as he would do unto others." At times his diction goes so far awry that his sentences are incoherent. An essay on Fairfield Porter concludes: "For his Promethean wrestling of the arbitrary and individual back from the powers of dullness and for passing them on to those who knew him personally or through his work, we shall long be grateful."

The reader who manages to untangle Ashbery's contorted language is rewarded for his efforts with ideas of dubious merit. One of the first pieces in the book is a review of the show "Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage," which was held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968. In an effort to convince his reader of the timeliness of the show—and timeliness, to Ashbery, counts for a lot—he observes that Surrealism is "the connecting link among any number of current styles thought to be mutually exclusive, such as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and 'color-field' painting. The art world is so divided into factions that the irrational, oneiric basis shared by these arts is, though

obvious, scarcely perceived. It would then have been doubly interesting and pertinent to the present moment in art to use this occasion to illustrate it." What is this statement supposed to mean? That a show on Surrealism should include metal boxes by Donald Judd? Doesn't Ashbery know that there's nothing more removed from the dream world of Surrealism than the "see what you see" literalness of Minimalism?

What makes Ashbery so disappointing as a critic is that he doesn't try to go beyond the deadening rhetoric one finds in art magazines. He came of age in the Fifties, when art criticism was being shaped by existentialism, and he's more than willing to accept the view (popularized by Harold Rosenberg) that a work of art is essentially a record of the drama of its creation. He says the etchings of John Cage "have a life of their own that is closer to life than to art." He sums up the work of Saul Steinberg as "a chronicle of used time." He believes that Jasper Johns "builds away from the edge of the canvas . . . from something basic and primitive toward something illusory, and in doing so manages to pass through all kinds of being that can happen in painting or sculpture." From the vantage of the Eighties, Ashbery's observations seem dated. The same can be said of Rosenberg, yet he wrote with such verve that his essays continue to hold our interest.

Despite its obvious limitations, *Reported Sightings* is not without occasional rewards. One of the almost inadvertent benefits of Ashbery's anything-goes approach is that it allows him to remain open to artists of diverse persuasions. His book gives equal time to the first-rate and the second-rate and puts us in touch with a great many painters who aren't major, but whose presence has lent the art scene a measure of integrity and vitality it would not have otherwise had. In 1949, when he arrived in New York, Ashbery befriended Jane Freilicher, who in turn introduced him to Nell Blaine, Robert de Niro, and Al Kresch. Ashbery became part of a downtown set that remained unimpressed by Abstract Expressionism, and many of the

artists he chose to write about (Leland Bell, Fairfield Porter, Trevor Winkfield, Joseph Shannon, Anne Dunn) are known for styles that went against fashion. At a time when critics are beginning to speak of Abstract Expressionism as an overrated movement (I'm not one of them), Ashbery's book is likely to be seen as an estimable departure from the official histories of the period. Reviewers will say that reading Ashbery is like getting the news on the old art scene over a beer at the White Horse Tavern.

It's all true—Ashbery is a most casual guide and he hooks up with artists you won't find mentioned in books by Irving Sandler or Dore Ashton. Yet he's too much in thrall to the people he's writing about to approach them with the necessary rigor; much of the time he sounds as if he's writing for a fan magazine. Niki de Saint-Phalle is described as "a stunning blonde ex-model." Jennifer Bartlett "is the art world's reigning media princess. When she travels via the Concorde to join her movie-actor husband in their Paris apartment (the very one in which much of *Last Tango in Paris* was filmed), it's automatically news." Alex Katz, in 1979, showed "a group of his 'cutouts'—a form he invented." Ashbery's review of "Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years," an important show held at the Whitney in 1978, opens with typically indiscriminate enthusiasm: "'Everything that's old is new again.' The cheerful message of Peter Allen's song applies not only to pop music, clothes and face-lifts, but to art as well."

Is Ashbery a critic—or is he a publicist? The line between the two is erased by his prose. Perhaps the fault lies less with Ashbery than with the magazines in which his pieces first appeared; it's hard to sound like Roger Fry if you're writing for the readers of *New York* magazine. Ashbery isn't trying to be grandly authoritative. Rather, he sees himself as a friendly emissary to the art world. Whether he is writing from Paris or New York, he is drawn to the energy of the art scene and wants to believe that painters and sculptors belong to a community where some succeed and some fail but where everyone is equally

committed and noble in his own way; maybe the failures, the people who persist at art without any luck, are even more noble than the successes. It's a generous attitude, and one he could never afford to take toward poetry; he cares too deeply about it to pretend that all poets are heroes. You can't take offense at Ashbery's good-natured interest in art. But you can take offense at the shabbiness of his prose. However little Ashbery asks of artists, he asks the world of them compared to what he asks of himself.

The proletariat's favorite son

Henri Troyat Gorky. Translated from the French by Lowell Bair. Crown, 216 pages, \$19.95

reviewed by David Gurewich

The recent news from the March of Glasnost is the formation of a Soviet chapter of PEN, the international writers' organization. Will its composition differ from that of the Soviet Writers' Union, the obedient executor of the Party's stick-and-carrot policy? Already many writers, both here and abroad, have protested the offering of PEN memberships to such warhorses of Socialist Realism as Yuri Bondarev and Stepan Zalygin, who not so long ago made fervent appeals for the expulsion of Solzhenitsyn and other Enemies of the State. I wonder: if Maxim Gorky, the founder of the Writers' Union, were alive today—would he pass muster?

The question might be regarded as merely idle, except that Gorky enjoys an enduring celebrity status in Soviet—and, to some degree, international—letters. Next to Lenin (at the time of the writing of this article), he remains a sacred cow in the Soviet Union. Just as attacking Lenin would force a complete—rather than partial—reevaluation of the basis of the Soviet State, attacking Gorky would cast aspersions on the entire body of Soviet letters.

The comparison is apt and yet isn't. Twenty years ago, when I went to school in Russia, the slightest criticism of Lenin sent shivers down one's spine; but no one took Gorky's work seriously. His name adorns one of Russia's largest cities, Moscow's major street, a car plant, a film studio: not a weapon in the Party's propaganda arsenal has been spared to etch his name in the collective memory. Yet in school his work was read because it was assigned rather than for pleasure, and it was assigned a lot. More than anyone else, he was The Writer of the Revolution and The Founder of Socialist Realism. As such, he rated more time in the curriculum than Tolstoy or Chekhov.

This pre-eminence was perfectly logical. According to the textbook, Tolstoy glorified Russian patriotism (never mind his philosophy) and Chekhov exposed bourgeois hypocrisy, but Gorky was the first writer to show workers climbing the barricades. Besides, Tolstoy was an aristocrat, and Chekhov came from a shopkeeper's family; both had to "get over their class origins." Gorky was hailed as the salt of the earth, and the proletariat's favorite son.

Henri Troyat's biography of Gorky is a modest, slim volume (unlike his previous books on Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Turgenev). The first chapters, dealing with Gorky's vagabond youth, are a straightforward condensation of his autobiographical trilogy, *My Childhood*, *In the World*, and *My Universities*; the rest of the book, outlining Gorky's literary career, his ascent to eminence as the foremost writer of the Left, and his ignominious end as Stalin's lapdog, is drawn from a wide range of sources. *Gorky* is a conscientious work, lively, sympathetic, descriptive—and eminently readable.

Gorky was born Alexey Peshkov in 1868 in Nizhni Novgorod, a large city on the Upper Volga (renamed Gorky *before* the writer's death, and notorious in the 1980s as Sakharov's place of exile). Peshkov, Sr., a wharf manager, died when Alexey was four. His widow took the boy back to her own

father, who owned a small dye shop—a petty bourgeois, according to the Bolshevik classification.

This is a telling detail, because, although Gorky was later identified as a workers' spokesman, neither his origin nor his subsequent employment had much to do with factory workers, who, according to Lenin, would be at the forefront of revolution. It is true that at the age of eleven, following his mother's death, he was put out on the street by his grandfather ("Alexey, you're not a medal; you can't go on hanging from my neck") and forced to earn his own living. This he did—as an errand boy, apprentice baker, and barge cleaner. But he joined the ranks of the *lumpen*proletariat rather than the proletariat. Eventually, his yearning for freedom led him to cast his lot with tramps and hoboes, and to travel with them around Russia.

As noted, these anarchic beginnings were stretched somewhat to meet the Soviet requirements for hagiography. Even so, there is no denying that the emotional and cultural burden of childhood poverty had a profound effect on Alexey. At his grandfather's house there were endless drunken rows about money, and he was beaten for every misstep, however minor. This is how his autobiography reads: vodka—beatings—bosses' cruelty—more vodka. Books provided him with a tiny flicker at the end of the tunnel.

Alexey arrived in Kazan, in what is today East Soviet Russia, and attempted to get a high-school equivalency certificate that would enable him to enroll in the university (the same one that Lenin had earlier attended). But he was an autodidact whose idea of culture stemmed from romantic French novels (in translation), like those of Dumas *père*, and he had trouble with formal education. Money was short, too, and he went back "to the people" to work on the docks. At the same time, he fell in with Marxist students whose socialist rhetoric and exhortations to armed struggle fell on fertile soil. Who else but Marx, he thought, could lead the working class out of the

vicious circle of drudgery and drunkenness?

Forever restless and incurably romantic (he attempted suicide twice over unrequited love), Alexey took a job at a rural store whose liberal owner was trying to educate the peasants. But soon Alexey grew frustrated with the peasants' drunken barbarism; for their part, the peasants grew wary of liberal teachings and eventually burned the store. Alexey moved on in his quest for truth, travelling several hundred miles on foot and by freight trains to pay a visit to Tolstoy. Alas, the Count was not at home.

Thus he roamed around the country, drifting from tramps to Social Democrats and back to tramps. Finally, in Tiflis (in Georgia), encouraged by a friend, he decided to commit some of his experiences to paper. Lo and behold, a local newspaper, *Caucasus*, accepted "Makar Chudra," a short story by one Maxim Gorky. He later claimed that he had discarded his real name, "Peshkov," as too humble (*peshka* means "pawn" in Russian), and chose to be called "Gorky" (meaning "bitter") because the name was more fitting with his view of life.

Troyat accepts this explanation without elaboration, and it does provide a good insight into Gorky's world, which was uncomplicated by nuance and shaped in part by Gorky's rage at his humble roots. It might be added that "Peshkov" is also related to *peshy*, "on foot"—an adjective not only devoid of pejorative meaning but actually more reflective of young Gorky's preferred mode of transportation. And "Gorky"? In Russian, the word, applied to a writer, evokes a world-weary truth-teller—an image that must be irresistible to anyone at age twenty-four, and a far cry from a mere "pawn."

"Makar Chudra" was followed by "Chelkash" and other stories from life "on the road." Today, their primitive, undisguised romanticism sounds sappy. Gorky's prose, nurtured by French popular novels, is turgid and woefully overdone; but at least it is not programmatic or calculated. He ranted a lot against the liberal intelligentsia as a bunch of idle talkers, yet, when the stories were brought out in book form, that

same intelligentsia hailed the purity and romantic thrust of the stories, their freedom from intellectual doubt. Finally, it seemed, A Man of the People had arrived.

Even more than his tramp stories, it was Gorky's "prose poems" that won him great popularity: "Song of the Falcon," "The Stormy Petrel," "Old Woman Isergil," and others. In one, a falcon soars into the sky and dies in battle, while a snake on the ground gloats over the futility of heroic action; in another, a petrel plunges into the storm; in "Isergil," a leader of a people in search of freedom exclaims: "What shall I do for the people?" He then tears out his flaming heart and holds it up to light the way.

These leaden allegories, with prose to match ("Over the grey plain of the sea soars proudly the petrel"), sound like a lot of highfalutin nonsense, but in 1898 they were exactly what Russia's romantic youth wanted to hear. After their publication in collected form, Gorky was an overnight sensation. He sounded off to his heart's content about how a writer should serve the People rather than amuse himself or his readers, and "progressive" Russia lapped it up.

This collection was followed by a novel, *Foma Gordyev*, the story of a self-made capitalist who bursts out in protest against bourgeois greed and is placed in an asylum. Although it contains some solid realistic detail—Gorky knew the milieu well—its anti-capitalist message is driven home with a sledgehammer. Privately, Gorky knew that he was far from being an accomplished writer. He sought advice from Korolenko, a respected author, and later from Chekhov. The latter liked the spontaneity of the tramp stories, but in a letter to a friend (Chekhov was far too delicate a soul to write a critical comment directly to Gorky) he called the novel "as monotonous as a dissertation. All the characters have the same way of talking, and they also think in the same way." Troyat notes astutely: "To Chekhov, writing meant painting; to Gorky, it meant proving."

But never mind. As far as "progressive" Russia was concerned, its idol could do no wrong. Throngs of students and workers

followed Gorky wherever he went; demonstrations erupted; the police despaired of maintaining order. Another novel appeared, entitled *Three*, and it was even more anti-bourgeois, anti-liberal, and pro-worker. When, in 1902, Gorky decided it was time to try his hand at play-writing, Stanislavsky's fashionable Moscow Art Theater immediately made room for Gorky's first play—before it was even written.

Alas, the theater audience was not yet inured to the rhetoric that had by then become Gorky's trademark, and *The Petty Bourgeois*, as the work was called, closed after a few performances. For his second play, *The Lower Depths*, however, Gorky, working with Stanislavsky, muted the "message" by scrapping his capitalist ogres and progressive workers, and returned to his beloved tramps, who grab at every chance to prove their own humanity: "Man!" the leading character exclaims. "Man—'tis a proud sound!" (It is unlikely that Gorky ever read Shakespeare.) The star-studded production, under Stanislavsky's direction, was a hit. Gorky's fame seemed boundless. (And he won the leading lady, too.)

Encouraged by his success, he turned back to virtuous workers in his next play, *Summer Folk*, in which he vented his fury at liberal intellectuals who were not doing enough to bring about the revolution. It was perhaps at this point, on the eve of the 1905 Revolution, that Gorky drew the attention of the Bolsheviks. He was already spending much of his time making speeches and writing proclamations. Now he was prodded into founding a Social Democrat newspaper, *New Life*, funded partly out of his own pocket. Troyat describes the Party's courtship of Gorky in a matter-of-fact manner, and it does sound like a well-planned operation.

In 1905, Gorky met Lenin, who lectured him on editorial matters. Gorky wanted *New Life* to maintain a political balance between the Bolsheviks and the liberals; Lenin wanted all non-Bolsheviks out, pure and simple. Soon the paper was closed down anyway. After the revolution was quashed,

Gorky faced possible arrest, since during the uprising his apartment had served as a center of operations. On the advice of his Bolshevik handlers, he left Russia. He was more useful capitalizing on his international fame and raising funds for the Party, they reasoned, than rotting away in jail.

Gorky's fame carried him along through Europe. A dashing figure, a romantic artist, a revolutionary, a man of the people—literary salons and Committees for Various Actions could not resist him. Only in America was the reception lukewarm; the Russian government, in a clever move, informed the authorities that Gorky and his travelling companion, Maria Andreyeva (the leading lady from the Moscow Art Theater), were not married. In America's puritan climate this fact was enough to make them pariahs.

Gorky returned the ill feeling. He hated America with a passion—people there were getting rich overnight without feeling guilty about it. Nevertheless, it was in America that he wrote *Mother*, a short novel that became synonymous with Socialist Realism, and it was in America that the book was first published in 1906. (The first Russian edition appeared in 1907, heavily censored, and was promptly banned; yet nothing was done to prevent the sale of the foreign edition.) *Mother* is almost gospel-like in the earnest piety with which Gorky depicts its characters, the worker Vlassov and his mother Nilovna, the mother of the title. The novel charts the latter's progress from an illiterate peasant to a full-fledged revolutionary organizer. Troyat's description of the book is brief and dispassionate: "These workers do not selfishly limit their concern to improving their own lot: they demand a radical change in human relations; they want to alter the face of the world." I can only add that generations of Soviet writers had their metaphoric limbs broken as they were forced to fit into the Procrustean bed of *Mother*.

Suffering from tuberculosis and still wary about returning to Russia, in 1907 Gorky settled in Capri, in Italy, where he worked on the autobiographical trilogy that many

consider his best prose. The characters are not buried under ideological verbiage as they are in his novels, perhaps because Gorky knew them too well to present them rigidly in a politically correct light. Here is his firsthand observation of some drunken icon painters from Nizhni Novgorod, with whom he worked briefly as an apprentice:

Too often Russian gaiety unexpectedly turns to cruelty and tragedy. A man dances as though breaking his chains, then suddenly he frees a ferocious beast inside himself and, seized with frenzied anguish, hurls himself at everyone he sees, tearing, biting, destroying.

Gorky knew his countrymen far better than did his political mentors, the Bolsheviks, and was later prophetic about the abyss of violence into which the Russian people would be plunged.

But he was also sensitive to nature, and the trilogy is filled with well-drawn descriptions of life on the Volga:

At night, the moon made a streak of light from the ship to the meadows on shore. The old reddish steamer, with a white band around her smokestack, moved along unhurriedly. Her paddle wheel flailed at the silvery water with an uneven movement. The dark banks came toward her, casting their shadows on the water, dotted with red lights from the windows of peasant houses. There was singing in a village and the refrain, *ai liuli*, sounded like hallelujah . . . The beauty of the night moved me to tears.

Torn between disease and homesickness, Gorky returned to Russia in 1913, then went back to Capri, then returned to Russia again. He began publishing another paper for the Bolsheviks. Yet he was not an obedient editor, and sometimes he watered down Lenin's prose to steer clear of the censors (for which Lenin called him "a silly fool"). When the Czar abdicated in February 1917 and the provisional government took over, Gorky was optimistic and opposed Bolshevik appeals to go on with the struggle. Russia was yearning for peace, he believed;

besides, as we have already noted, in his tramp years Gorky had witnessed the limitless Russian capacity for violence, and he now feared that the Bolsheviks would help unleash it. He was far from elated at the Bolshevik takeover in October: "Lenin, Trotsky, and their fellow travellers have already been poisoned by the slimy venom of power," he wrote. "[They] believe that any crime is justified." Gorky was used to being in opposition and for a while could not bring himself to come over to the ruling side.

But come over he did. In July 1918, when the Bolsheviks closed down his paper, his conversion was immediate. It is not hard to guess at the reasons for this change of heart. Gorky was no longer a young firebrand; he was a fifty-year-old man, tired and ill: nine months of opposing the Bolsheviks had taken a greater toll on him than twenty years of opposing the Czar. Yet his conversion took place with such phenomenal speed that one wonders if perhaps some other, more covert, means of persuasion were used. Alas, no such speculations are to be found in Troyat's biography; he generally chooses not to probe.

The Party, at any rate, took back its prodigal son. Gorky was a prize they could easily exploit to gain popular support. And they gave him what he wanted—they made him feel useful and important. For the next three years, amid the Civil War and widespread famine, Gorky wrote apologist articles and amassed a collection of Oriental antiques that undoubtedly came from confiscated property. At the same time, he used his influence to intercede on behalf of the very intellectuals he used to deride before the war, to save them from starvation or execution.

By 1921, his health was deteriorating quickly and the Party was there to help. Gorky was dispatched abroad to sing paeans to Russia's new rulers. Troyat indicates that his decision to leave was a complex one, perhaps even forced upon him by Lenin. Gorky realized that he was being used by the Party, whether in or out of Russia; but by now the Party and Russia were one in his

mind, and Russia was not to be harmed at all costs. The echoes of his youthful rebelliousness surged and died, stifled by his patriotism. Besides, the economic situation in Russia was not enviable, even for the elite; abroad, the Party would foot all his bills.

Gorky's years in Europe make for some amusing—and painful—reading. In Sorrento, Italy, he lived in a confined world of his own; he never learned Italian or mixed with the locals. He was still riding the crest of international fame and corresponded with Europe's major writers—Stefan Zweig, H. G. Wells, and the like; at the same time he was openly dismissive of the entire body of European literature, although he never bothered to learn a foreign language and knew European books solely in bad translations. Only Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland were spared—on political grounds.

But Gorky saved most of his vitriol for the émigré writers like Bunin and Andreyev, who responded in kind, especially after he published a gushy obituary to Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the founder of Cheka, the secret police. It would have been hard for the émigré writers to respond otherwise: nearly all of them had at least one relative executed or exiled by Cheka. But to Gorky the attacks were another proof that, for a Russian, normal life outside Russia is impossible.

In addition to writing articles and letters during this period, Gorky worked on *The Life of Klim Samgin*, a multi-volume cast-of-thousands saga of pre-revolutionary Russia (he never finished it). It is a tired novel, slow as molasses, that again depicts the liberal Russian intelligentsia as a *bête noire*. Like a true artist, Gorky was continuing to look for a giving hand to bite; but now, out of habit, he was biting the ghost of a hand, for the Russian liberals who had once supported him were gone—some executed, some in exile. And Gorky prudently refrained from attacking his true benefactor—the Party.

Was there more to Gorky's vituperative attacks on the Russian intelligentsia than mercenary motives? Troyat touches on the subject only in passing, but it seems not so

farfetched to say that Gorky never got rid of his inferiority complex toward the intelligentsia. They were educated, and he was not; they were privileged, and he was not; they adapted with relative ease to the West (some less so than others)—and he could not. Was this why he was so pleased to play Good Samaritan to them amid the Civil War terror? Did his resentment at émigré circles stem in part from self-hate? After all, they had found the courage to leave Mother Russia rather than lick the regime's boots, and he had stayed to serve the new masters.

The remaining eight years of Gorky's life, starting with his return to Russia in 1928, were the noisiest and saddest. Stalin was tightening the screws on the country and was determined to squeeze every drop of publicity out of a cultural asset like Gorky. As in the good old days, Gorky took to the road—but now in a private railroad car instead of sneaking rides aboard freight trains. His tours were arranged with enough brouhaha to make any Hollywood flack envious; he spoke to welders, bakers, Young Pioneers—whatever waving crowd the local KGB (then GPU) was able to muster. Was he able to see the horror through the flags and flowers? Not according to his articles and speeches (if he was indeed the person who was cranking them out).

Ten months later, exhausted, Gorky returned to Italy. Then he was summoned back, for more touring. And on it went. Gorky, who once wrote about Lenin's being "poisoned by the venom of power," was now helplessly receiving kudos from the Great Leader himself. "This thing is greater than Goethe's *Faust*," Stalin wrote on a page of Gorky's mediocre story "The Maiden and Death" (reversing the routine by autographing the book for its author). Finally, Gorky was appointed head of the new Writers' Union and, at its first Congress, proclaimed from the podium: "If the enemy does not surrender, he should be destroyed!" There is no loyalty higher than that of an ex-rebel.

By then the GPU had isolated Gorky from the world so completely that even his death in 1936 (ostensibly from tuberculosis) is

cloaked in mystery. Stalin did his best to muddy the waters, claiming that Gorky had been murdered and using it as one of the “crimes” at the 1938 Rykov-Bukharin show trial. Twenty-five years later, Gorky’s physician, Dr. Pletnev (one of the accused whose death sentence had been commuted to a term in the Gulag) charged Stalin himself with poisoning Gorky. Khrushchev implied as much in his own accusations against Stalin. To his credit, Troyat does not sway one way or another: Gorky was indeed dying, and the need to hasten his death seems dubious. On the other hand, no hideous act can be put past Stalin, and the tyrant’s penchant for overkill is well documented. (He had probably cooked up enough charges for the Rykov-Bukharin trial without Gorky’s “murder.”) The fact remains that, as Troyat sadly notes, “even after his death . . . Gorky continued to serve the regime.”

By now it should be clear that those who have never heard of Gorky will find Henri Troyat’s primer-like biography both informative and unobtrusive. Other readers will wonder why he so seldom ventures further. Gorky leaps off the page, warts and all—but surely his rich, complicated life lends itself to a more penetrating analysis. One reason for Troyat’s reticence may be that he is really interested in “literary” writers, and Gorky’s artistic output hardly measures up to that of titans like Tolstoy and Chekhov.

Be that as it may, anyone who is interested in literature’s role in society, or in the writer as a public figure, will find Gorky’s life hugely instructive. He was not a great artist, but he had some talent, he had an artistic instinct, and at least in his formative stages he had some integrity. There is every reason to believe that, with his flair for publicity, he might have made a prominent career in today’s America: summering on Martha’s Vineyard, signing appeals, and jetting from symposium to conference. If he were alive today, he would undoubtedly be a PEN member in good standing—easily its president. (In 1921, Gorky became an honorary member of PEN, nominated by his friend John Galsworthy, the

organization’s founder, with the understanding that Gorky would start a Soviet chapter. Two years later, he reported back that such a move “was not expedient.”)

This image may seem amusing, pathetic, or dubious, depending on one’s view of the Western literary establishment. Even recognizing that establishment’s fundamental corruption, however, one cannot deny its relative benevolence. Certainly Gorky would not be made to denounce *The Enemies of the People*, nor would his name be used as a cudgel to punish other writers.

Abroad, Gorky’s name has faded into the oblivion of indifference, but in Russia, at the hands of his own countrymen, he is being subjected to the harshest treatment yet. In the eyes of young Soviet writers, neither Gorky’s patriotism nor his physical infirmity is a sufficient alibi to justify his paeans to tyranny and mass murder. After all, an artist who uses his fame to help the regime conceal atrocities is many times more an accomplice than a simple KGB secretary who types up the list of those to be executed. As for his literary output, it is hard to imagine anyone but a scholar of Soviet literary history being interested in it. Even so, his legacy reaches far beyond the aesthetic value of the work itself. Russian intellectuals often refer to Russian literature as the “house that Pushkin built.” Gorky’s tower of Socialist Realism is a Stalinist-era eyesore, dumped unceremoniously atop this house in violation of every aesthetic standard. There is no question that the younger rebels of Russian letters will want to pull it down, but the labor will be long and arduous. It is perhaps easier to elect Sakharov to the new parliament than to purge Soviet publishers of the notion that obedience to the cause of Communism is the proper yardstick for measuring a writer’s achievement.

One wonders: If the twenty-year-old Gorky, a romantic rebel, had been shown his own image forty years later—a Portrait of the Soviet Artist as an Old Man—would he have been outraged? This is the kind of question that his next biographer may want to grapple with.

Letters

Notes on Bach

To the Editors:

Samuel Lipman's "Reflections on Bach" (September 1989) left me somewhat perplexed. Surely no one should be that indignant about "Mooged" or "Kurzweiled" Bach. Its proper place could only be in an advertisement for an expensive German car. What is disturbing is his failure to name names. While the attack on present-day Bach scholarship hits the mark, it would be helpful to know which performers fit into this crabby and unimaginative lot.

To my mind, the best Bach playing has always come from more eccentric talents: from Edwin Fischer and Wanda Landowska to Glenn Gould and, I would argue, Trevor Pinnock and Andras Schiff. Their passion and extravagance is evident in their playing regardless of the intellectual baggage or fear they may or may not carry.

Please, we don't want gossip: just a few specifics to clarify his position.

Edmund D. Pitaro
New York, NY

To the Editors:

Just completed Samuel Lipman's "Reflections on Bach." I marvel at his capacity to fight back. Just when I think all sanity has fled the island or been crusted with conformity, there's his voice in this concrete oblivion. It would be so much easier to surrender, to retreat to northern Vermont, if only

Mr. Lipman and his colleagues would just pull over and let the flood tide of banality, arrogance, and mediocrity just wash over us all, completely, utterly, once and for all in one euphoric drowning. I don't know whether to thank or reproach him.

Ron F. Maxwell
New York, NY

Samuel Lipman replies:

My purpose in writing about contemporary Bach performance was not to restrict performance models, as Mr. Pitaro would have me do, by choosing my favorite performers. In my sound-world of Bach there is room even for what Mr. Pitaro so nicely calls a "crabby and unimaginative lot." Playing Bach is too important for musicians and audiences alike to restrict them to a list—anyone's list—of approved specialists and styles. But since Mr. Pitaro has in fact named names, I think it should be remarked that it is eccentric indeed of him to put Edwin Fischer, that very proper and straightforward model of a Germanic musician, on a list of "eccentric talents"; it also seems curious of him to include the amiable and even genteel Trevor Pinnock and the cautiously dainty Andras Schiff under the very same rubric of eccentricity.

My deep thanks to Ron Maxwell for his kind words. To him I would only say that he shouldn't even think of retreating to northern Vermont—we need him too badly in Gotham, our center of civilization.

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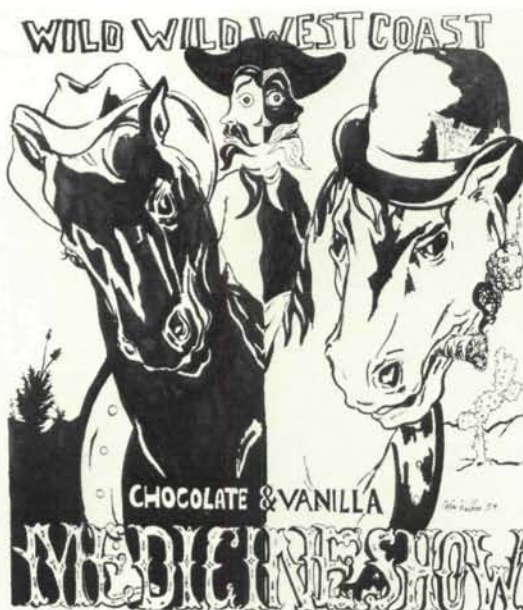
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